

FOR THOSE WITH EARS TO HEAR:
EMERSON, RHETORIC, AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY



RICHARD E. JOINES

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ABBREVIATIONS

- BGE Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Trans. Walter Kaufmann (NY: Vintage, 1966).
- EL Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Eds. Stephen E. Whicher, Robert E. Spiller, and Wallace E. Williams, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966).
- J Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Ed. Edward W. Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, 10 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1909-1914).
- JMN Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Eds. William H. Gilman and Ralph H. Orth, et al., 16 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960-82).
- PAW Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
- TOM Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
- TN Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Topical Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Ralph H. Orth, et al., 3 vols. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1990).
- TUP Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Two Unpublished Essays* (Boston: Lamson, Wolff, & Co. 1895).
- W Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Standard Library Edition, 14 vols. (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1883).
- WPP Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

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By

Richard E. Joines

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Chair: John P. Leavey, Jr.
Major Department: English

The Ralph Waldo Emerson explored in this dissertation bears no resemblance to the popular images of Emerson as an optimistic spiritualist or a philosopher of democracy. Instead, I examine Emerson as a Platonist political philosopher and practitioner of the ancient rhetorical art of exotericism/esotericism. Using a methodology for reading esotericism derived from Plato, Maimonides, Alfarabi, Nietzsche and Leo Strauss, I examine Emerson's theories concerning the "dæmonic" potential of eloquence in speech and in books, his understanding of esotericism, pious frauds, and fabling, and the ancient anti-Enlightenment, anti-egalitarian, and anti-democratic thrust of his political philosophy which aims at overturning democratic leveling and instituting rank ordering.

Prophetic of his avid reader Nietzsche's political insights, Emerson diagnosed American democracy as a form of nihilism that seeks to conquer nature and to replace the divine with the merely human. Though Emerson publicly addressed the political and social reforms of his times, he deployed esoteric stratagems and a multileveled form of

speaking and writing in his lectures and essays. By these means, Emerson hoped to create an audience of noble and virtuous individuals who would become capable of overturning democracy and returning their societies to the ancient categories of “the good” and of “the best regime” and to a philosophy premised on “the natural” as a proper guide to a nation’s moral and political life.

Through close examinations of Emerson’s readings of Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, Montaigne, Bacon, and Coleridge, this dissertation reveals the political and philosophical depths concealed between the lines of Emerson’s seemingly democratic texts. While many accept without question that Emerson’s politics were progressive or liberal-democratic and while others deplore the reactionary nature of his elitism, Emerson’s political philosophy moves beyond simple Left/Right categories. Because Emerson spoke in parables only to those with ears to hear, his relationship to the “modern” philosophical and political arguments of the nineteenth century is more complex than those critics who would historicize or “de-transcendentalize” Emerson believe. To comprehend Emerson’s political philosophy demands close attention to the “initiative” rhetoric of his hieroglyphic speech and writing prudently designed to exclude the many from the truths of the few.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Writing is the greatest of arts, the subtilest, and of most miraculous effect;
and to it the education is costliest.

—Emerson, “Art and Criticism” (W 12:283)

In hours of high mental activity we sometimes do the book too much honor,
reading out of it better things than the author wrote,—reading, as we say,
between the lines.

—Emerson, “Quotation and Originality” (W 8:187)

This dissertation is an examination of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s education in and his practice of writing, “the greatest of arts,” and in its subtleties, which he believed could produce miraculous effects. The Emerson explored in this dissertation bears no resemblance to the familiar pop-culture Emerson of naïve optimism, self-help psychology, new-age spiritualism, or antiestablishment individualism. Nor is the Emerson of this study the spiritual, mystical transcendentalist Emersonian circulated through innumerable American literature surveys and critical studies, the politically progressive theorist of an American “democratic individualism,” or some precursor to American pragmatism or to European existentialist or poststructuralist thought. My approach does not seek to make Emerson our contemporary or to mine his writings for their relevance to us or to our concerns with textual authority, subjectivity, or discursive hegemony.

My reading of Emerson is historical, but not historicizing. Though I am sympathetic to those scholars who “de-Transcendentalize” Emerson by unsettling the

cozy boundaries of Emerson scholarship and rescue his writings from his public image and biography, I find their historicizing of his thought merely according to nineteenth-century notions of power, politics, or science limiting. If Emerson is “better” and more complex, or more vicious and vigorous, than previously perceived, his thought is also too complex to be hemmed in by the obsessions of his century. My interpretation is, therefore, philological, for I seek to discover the relationship between Emerson’s expression and his intention, to discover the spirit encrypted in the letter, to do his books the honor of reading between their lines, and to understand Emerson as he understood himself.

As a writer, Emerson sought what all writers seek: to realize his intention in language and to make his texts embodiments of that intention. I seek to discover and disclose what Emerson means and means to do (the illocutionary and perlocutionary intentions and effects of his locutions), not what he means or has meant to fans, readers, and devoted scholars. My method, therefore, is not appreciative. If it does not focus on how Emerson’s writings help us understand ourselves today as individuals, Americans, intellectuals, reformers, or nature enthusiasts, it is because, as I argue, Emerson was not interested in such things. Instead, I read Emerson as a writer of a special kind—a political philosopher—whose primary intention is to teach his most careful readers how to think otherwise than they do about things most needful. Appreciative and historicizing methods of reading cannot see *this* Emerson; thus, the American tradition of literary and social thought has failed to adequately recognize this figure Harold Bloom has hailed “our central man.”

Emerson, as a political philosopher, understands that philosophy's quest for knowledge since Plato culminates in Kant's admission of ignorance before "the thing-in-itself." Emerson's Plato is not the Plato known to the tradition of philosophy as the proponent of the doctrine of "two worlds"—the world of eternal ideas or forms, the world of change. Emerson knows the history of philosophy—beginning with Socrates' admission of ignorance—points to the necessity of reading Plato untraditionally and more carefully than philosophers have. For Emerson, Platonism (as he writes in "Plato; or, the Philosopher" in *Representative Men*) is philosophy itself: it is a quest for wisdom, not the formulating of arguments or doctrines about epistemology or ontology, and it is a way of life—perhaps the only worthwhile way of life—an essentially a moral activity, one that seeks to distinguish the better from the worse and to create the good out of the bad.¹ As such, for Emerson (and for Emerson's ardent reader Nietzsche), philosophers ought to be legislators instituting order where there is chaos, declaring the highest values, and determining meaning in the world.

Emerson as a political philosopher understood that Plato's doctrines of the soul, of the two worlds, and of the Good were exoteric or public teachings that did not contain Plato's true or esoteric teachings. Emerson perceived in Plato's esoteric teachings the necessity of educating the few who might become actual legislators or a new ruling class, or of educating the one who might become the new prince, the philosopher-king, or what

¹ Gustaaf Van Cromphout, in *Emerson's Ethics*, writes, "Emerson remained a lifelong Platonist in his commitment to an absolute foundation for ethics" (12). Emerson's primary concern, therefore, "was to establish the universal authority of the moral sentiment, or what amounts to the same thing, the universality of the moral law" (34). The moral law could only "command real respect and authority" if it were understood to be "normatively universal," otherwise there could only be "subjective, relativistic, and inconsistent ethical judgments," and there would be no law at all (35).

Nietzsche will call the *Übermensch*. This education must be founded upon the most ancient of principles: character and virtue. He believed with Plato that the best social order mirrors the natural order; therefore, no society ought ever seek to be democratic or egalitarian, for this is unnatural.² Though recognizing with Plato that the founding of best regime ruled by the philosopher king is unlikely, Emerson's teachings sought to prepare for the event should *Fortuna* choose to smile upon his society. The Emerson presented here, therefore, is anti-modern, anti-Enlightenment, anti-democratic, and anti-egalitarian. That so many of his readers and critics have failed to recognize Emerson's "ancient" political philosophy is due to at least two factors: 1) Emerson's skillful practice of the Platonist art of esotericism in his moral essays which contain between their lines a way of thinking whose mysteries are only revealed to those dedicated seekers with ears to hear the parables and dark sayings of wise men, and 2) a hermeneutic unable to read what was written esoterically.

The debate and scholarship focused on Emerson shifts terms with the times. While many scholars remain interested in "Emerson the Transcendentalist," his canonized theologico-mystical notions of the self-reliant individual and his seemingly Kantian romanticism, others are becoming interested in "Emerson the reformer" and attempt to recruit a "progressive-liberal" Emerson into the ranks of American democratic thinkers. As T. Gregory Garvey notes in his introduction to *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform*, however, scholars who wish to count Emerson as a democratic or egalitarian reformer must somehow account for "Emerson the Transcendentalist," who values the reform of the individual over the reform of society

² Stephen E. Whicher writes in *Freedom and Fate*, "A worship of the Law remains Emerson's first stay and foundation before the insoluble riddles of his existence" (166).

and who often expresses disdain for, in Garvey's words, "piecemeal tinkering with the mechanics of society" (xii). Such a contradiction in Emerson's writings creates "the Emerson dilemma," for Emerson only ever seems committed to an "indirect means of achieving social reform" (Garvey xii). The Emerson dilemma, therefore, cannot be resolved using the terms currently available in the Emerson Industry.

This work introduces a third term into this debate by concentrating on the rhetorical subtleties and the indirection of Emerson's writings: Emerson the political philosopher. Emerson sought to position himself, as he says in an early lecture, as a link in the chain of a venerable tradition: "the uninterrupted succession of patient observers." I read this as a Platonist tradition of writers who reiterate a set of political and philosophical teachings, using similar esoteric methods, in the hopes of activating the few who might be capable of directing history and their societies towards the political organization and philosophical thinking sought by the ancients. Scholars who have argued either side of the Emerson dilemma often ignore those ancient aspects of Emerson's thinking which do not fit their modern or contemporary theories or have attempted to explain away those moments where Emerson directly contradicts their modern images of him as mere lapses. They too often prefer what they think Emerson says—or what they wish he were saying—to what he actually says. If Emerson is read as a political philosopher, unburdened from the history of appreciative scholarship yet burdened with Emerson's own approach to reading and writing, this dilemma can be understood if not finally resolved, and what Emerson actually said and wrote can be assessed with an ear attuned to Emerson's intention.

I take the terms “political philosophy” and “political philosopher” and their definitions largely from the work of Leo Strauss who contends that the greatest philosophers across the ages and of all nations share a common nature and function *as philosophers*. That is, having understood the relationship between the city and the philosopher, philosophers realized that philosophizing openly could prove dangerous either to philosophers (in that philosophers could face persecution, exile, or execution for questioning the philosophical, political, or religious foundations of their societies or regimes) or to their societies (for philosophers’ questions concerning the laws, customs, and beliefs of their societies do not offer a substitute set of laws, customs, or beliefs but only unsettle foundations). Therefore, in order to elude persecution while practicing their art, they justified the necessity of the political practice of philosophical esotericism. They learned the art of writing between the lines so that their texts, exoteric and open to all, could contain an esoteric content available only to those trained in dialectical thought, or capable of being trained in dialectical thought.

Evidence that Emerson understood these necessary truths is found in a late lecture titled “The Scholar” (1876), where he writes that the scholar and the genius must often conceal their weapons and their ends. Society might be “dazzled and deceived by the weapon, without inquiring into the cause for which it is drawn” (W 10:266). Practical men distrust the “morbid intellectual tendency” of wise men, not because of the truth of the wise but because “the idealistic views unfit their children for business . . . and do not qualify them for any complete life of a better kind.” Emerson, like all political philosophers, knows that the truth can “threaten the validity of contracts” and that the

truth must remain concealed unless it is able to “prevail so far as to establish the new kingdom which shall supersede contracts, oaths, and property” (W 10:266-67).

In offering a new interpretation of the essays and lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson as an esoteric political philosopher, I remove him from the tradition of German Romanticism where many trace his philosophical roots and place him instead in a tradition that begins with Plato, continues in Alfarabi (with whom Emerson was not familiar) and Maimonides (whom Emerson encountered in Coleridge if not on his own), Lessing, Montaigne, Bacon, and Coleridge (all of whom Emerson read carefully), and finds its modern expression in philosophers of the intransigent Right, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Leo Strauss, Carl Schmitt, Francis Fukuyama, and Samuel P. Huntington. This ancient tradition, perhaps always already a Counter-Enlightenment tradition, and its modern manifestations, includes not only those who sought to combine the way of Socrates and the way of Pythagoras (Plato, the Neoplatonists: Plotinus, Proclus, Iamblicus), but others who believed the world was naturally and inevitably divided between the many and the few and that no amount of education or social engineering could eliminate this difference. In this work, I argue that Emerson was not a “modern” thinker either in the guise of “democratic reformist” or “Transcendentalist” but was instead a writer committed to Plato’s “ancient” philosophical task of fashioning the best regime. The goal of his writings and lectures was, through esoteric subtleties, to create an audience of disciples and prepare its mind for the moral transformation a political project arrayed against modern, utilitarian, or egalitarian politics and philosophy requires.

In Emerson’s essay “Spiritual Laws,” from *Essays: First Series*, we find the following:

If a teacher have any opinion which he wishes to conceal, his pupils will become as fully indoctrinated into that as into any which he publishes. If you pour water into a vessel twisted into coils and angles, it is vain to say, I will pour it only into this or that;—it will find its level in all. Men feel and act the consequences of your doctrine without being able to show how they follow. Show us an arc of the curve, and a good mathematician will find out the whole figure. We are always reasoning from the seen to the unseen. Hence the perfect intelligence that subsists between wise men of remote ages. A man cannot bury his meanings so deep in book but time and like-minded men will find them. Plato had a secret doctrine, had he? What secret can he conceal from the eyes of Bacon? of Montaigne? of Kant? Therefore Aristotle said of his works, “They are published and not published” (W 2:139).

Is this hint enough that Emerson had *ágrapha dógmata* (unwritten doctrines), that his teachings are published and not published? If a writer mentions esotericism, as Emerson does here and elsewhere (as in “Quotation and Originality:” “Goethe’s favorite phrase, ‘the open secret,’ translates Aristotle’s answer to Alexander, ‘These books are published and not published’” [W 8:176]), does that indicate that the writer employs it or justify the suspicion that he might?

To read Emerson as a political philosopher who practices the art of esotericism is not to focus merely on one aspect of his thought. It is not even to concentrate exclusively on those writings whose primary subject seems to be politics in general or specifically. In order to reveal Emerson’s veiled teaching, such a reading must focus on the literary elements of Emerson’s writing as much as or more than their explicit content. It must read for those hints concerning “the perfect intelligence that subsists between wise men of remote ages.” For reasons that will be elaborated throughout this work, I argue that Emerson conceived and intended his moral essays and lectures to be fundamentally works of political philosophy, for his primary concern is always to indicate, sometimes openly but most often only indirectly, how his society and the individuals who make up society fall short of the good or of the best regime. Political philosophy, concerned as it

is with how we ought to live, is capable of comprehending the various topics Emerson considers: history, nature, love, friendship, fate, eloquence, education, art, aristocracy, religion, and so on. However, to read Emerson as a political philosopher is not so much to concentrate on *what* he writes, as it is to make a careful study of *how* he writes on any given topic.

This work examines Emerson's texts in relation to the writings he studied most closely as he wrote his lectures and essays—Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, Montaigne, Bacon, Coleridge—and in relation to such later political philosophers as Nietzsche, Strauss, and Schmitt. My method, however, is neither intertextual nor a study of influence. Instead, I seek to unmask the rhetoric of Platonist political philosophy and the intention to divide audiences into the many and the few as these manifest themselves in Emerson. In short, this is a study of the practice of political philosophy, or of esotericism, as much as it is a study of a particular political philosopher—Emerson. In order to explicate fully Emerson's esotericism, I would be obliged to provide a comprehensive interpretation of every essay and lecture as well as interpretations of the allusions and quotations in them. This is more than one person could do in the space of a single volume. Therefore, I have limited my analysis to a reading of the early Emerson—his early published and unpublished lectures and essays and *Nature*, which make up Emerson's "initiatory" teachings, the essays that make up *Essays: First Series*, and to a few later texts (especially those collected in *Society and Solitude*) which throw light on his early teachings.

It would be easy to support a variety of opposing claims about Emerson's politics by extracting passages that appear to confirm he was for popular or democratic reforms

such as abolition or women's rights, or, conversely, that he was a racist or a sexist, that he supported the modern, Enlightenment notion of democracy or that he would have preferred a Spartan martial society. Many scholars have done just this, and the Emerson Industry has profited from this exchange. This study, however, does not wish to make a simple claim that can be refuted by a well-known Emersonian chestnut. Instead, I defend my interpretation against any easy refutation or charge of misreading by demonstrating how most of the notions Emerson's readers have come to devoutly believe about him are, upon careful reading, to be considered merely salutary myths either because a methodical approach to Emerson's rhetoric demonstrates another, esoteric, meaning beneath this surface or because Emerson directly or indirectly, and perhaps elsewhere in his corpus, indicates we are not to take such teachings seriously.

Frank Kermode in *The Genesis of Secrecy* writes that among the rules and cautions necessary for embarking on a reading of esotericism is the need for some assurance that a book has sufficient value to warrant the kind of attention one proposes to give it (16). "Once a text is credited with high authority," he writes, "it is studied intensely; once it is so studied it acquires mystery or secrecy" (144). Emerson's writings have been subjected to intense scrutiny and are considered foundational, canonical, and even scriptural texts in the American literary tradition. Many suspect there is more in them than meets the casual eye. Few, however, have made much headway in exploring this issue. Because of the current predominant methods of literary interpretation, Emerson's texts have lost much of the mystery and curiosity earlier critics noticed there. Some of the best writings on Emerson are some of the ones most forgotten in current Emerson scholarship: John S. Harrison's *The Teachers of Emerson* (1910), which argues

for Emerson's Platonism, Edmund G. Berry's *Emerson's Plutarch* (1961), which argues for Emerson's classical orientation in politics and philosophy, and Charles Lowell Young's *Emerson's Montaigne* (1941), which places Emerson squarely in the tradition of the great moral essayists. These scholars read Emerson as belonging to a Timaeian strand of Platonists for whom Platonism was not so much the tradition of a single man—Plato—but a body of works and a tradition that combined Platonism, Pythagorean teachings, Eleusinian mysteries, Neoplatonism, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Skeptics, and Eastern esotericism. This Timaeian strand finds the eternal natural law, standards of moral right and wrong, and divine reason written into nature and the mind of man. It reads nature as a book full of symbols that speak to the wise and studies nature in order to confirm the conclusions of religion and of the highest laws.

The current historicizing trend to "de-Transcendentalize" Emerson, in its attempt to make Emerson seem more rigorous a thinker than appreciative critics have, too often slights Emerson's Platonism, for it assumes it understands what Platonism is and that it is a thing safely dismissed, and slights Emerson by treating him as a mere symptom of his times. Recently, however, Richard Geldard has discovered a religious esotericism (essentially, however, just another new-age spiritualism) in Emerson, and Arthur Versluis has produced several important and fascinating readings of Emerson as a hermetic esotericist whose writing draws upon Jacob Böhme, theosophy, and Emanuel Swedenborg in significant ways others have missed. The esoteric Emerson I am interested in extricating, however, is of a different strain.

Kermode also warns about the persistent criticism concerning reading esoterically, which he calls "the esoteric paradox:" "if all this is 'in' the book, why hasn't

it been noticed before?" (10). The fact that no one has produced readings similar to mine does not mean an esoteric interpretation of Emerson is on the wrong track, though it does mean my interpretation invites skepticism and courts disagreement. Part of the task of my "conspiratorial hypothesis," therefore, must be not merely to invite skepticism but provoke it, to turn it from silent doubt into infuriated counterargument, for only in this way can Emerson's secrets be exposed. The one making such an argument risks sounding foolish to scholarly commonsense, like a nonbeliever, but this conspiratorial hermeneutic that seeks out a Platonist strain of political philosophy in Emerson finds in Louis Pasteur a familiar spirit.

Bruno Latour, in *The Pasteurization of France*, tells of how Pasteur confronted the theory of morbid spontaneity with visible proof and causal evidence. By collecting cultures and letting them grow, Pasteur convinced skeptics that "invisible" things—microbes, germs—not only existed but had visible effects. If the skeptics still did not believe and disputed his findings, he could only ask them: "Can you see a dot? Can you see a red stain? Can you see a spot? They would be forced to say yes, or abandon the profession, or in the end be locked up in an asylum. They would be *forced* to accept the argument" (83). Latour shows how Pasteur "manufactured irrefutable proof" through a "wild set of associations . . . to make the enemy palpable and his theory invincible" (Hunt 26). My "divination" of the "invisible" Platonist contagion in Emerson has not been left to stand on its own but is justified and reconciled by careful readings of Emerson's texts, their influences, and their exegesis. The readings produced in this laboratory may not have the same force as Pasteur's experiments. They may not succeed in producing a vaccine capable of inoculating others against the contagion. They may not be either

irrefutable or invincible, but perhaps these wild sets of association will succeed in inventing "a new theater of proof" (Latour 85) and force the issue of Emerson's secrets to the surface for all to see and judge.

Perhaps the central question this kind of reading of Emerson must address is the distinction between his exoteric teaching for the many and his esoteric teaching for the few. The fundamental difficulty one faces in attempting to make sense of the writings of any esoteric political philosopher derives from what Paul Bagley, in "On the Practice of Esotericism," calls the lack of a "segregation premise" (235). Exo/esoteric writings exceed the aims of oral esoteric teachings, for they are designed "to present two dissimilar teachings at the same time: one is propounded for the majority of readers, while the other is detected only by those who exercise sufficient effort to discern it." To speak simultaneously to the vulgar and the wise, to communicate "certain views in a covert manner to one audience without plainly divulging them to others" (236) requires the esotericist to devise or use specific rhetorical and literary techniques or stratagems. The difficulty the critic or reader faces is how to decide what is exoteric and what is esoteric in the text and in its presentation.

Initially, one may designate as the exoteric level those teachings that contain seemingly salutary teachings and appealing messages that do not disturb the slumber of the many. Emerson's ideologically "American" valorizations of the individual and freedom, with which most students of American literature are familiar, are of this type. The esoteric or scotomized instruction that would disturb this slumber is addressed to those "in the know," to philosophers or potential philosophers, indirectly and contains the writer's most serious thoughts. With this in mind, one might read Emerson's most

memorable *bons mots* as stratagems: as noble lies (*error utilis, simulatio credulis, salubre mendacium*), as *pseudoprodosia* (dissemination of false information), *pseudoautomolia* (luring of the enemy into a false move or trap), *praestigiae* (juggler's tricks), *ludificari* (teasing through superior skill), or *apate* (traps) used to test the audience for his esoteric teachings.

For Emerson, understanding a philosopher's words and his intentions involves more than merely hearing or reading them. True understanding is mysterious, erotic, or dæmonic. In "Spiritual Laws" he writes, "There is no teaching until the pupil is brought into the same state or principle in which you are; a transfusion takes place; he is you and you are he" (W 2:144). Only when this transfusion has taken place will the student understand the difference between the teacher's exoteric and esoteric discourse. Emerson platonizes: "We have yet to learn that the thing uttered in words is not therefore affirmed" (W 2:145). Emerson also knows the silence of wise men is always significant:

You think because you have spoken nothing when others spoke, and have given no opinion on the times, on the church, on slavery, on marriage, on socialism, on secret societies, on the college, on parties and persons, that your verdict is still expected with curiosity as a reserved wisdom. Far otherwise; your silence answers very loud. (W 2:148)

To have remained silent on an issue indicates to those with ears to hear that the issue is less important for politics or philosophy than the many have thought. Throughout this work, I argue that Emerson's silences, his superficial inconsistencies, his poeticisms, and his eloquent rhetoric conceal a consistent and precise political thinking which underlies a coherent anti-democratic and ancient political project.

Kermode says an "insider's reading" must begin with a "circumcised ear" (16). In "On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy," Leo Strauss claims that in

order to begin to make sense of texts written esoterically, one cannot begin with any historicist prescriptions or pre-judgments. My interpretation of Emerson considers him a serious student of classical political philosophy and an aggressive advocate for the return of its categories to politics and philosophy. He was prepared, as Strauss argued such a student should be, “to consider the possibility that its teachings are simply true, or that it is decisively superior to modern philosophy.” He ceased, as Strauss says one must, to take his bearings from modern signposts, and he sought out old signposts, “concealed by heaps of dust and rubble.” The condition for understanding classical philosophy, Strauss indicates, is the condition of philosophizing: one cannot help but be “in a condition of utter bewilderment” where one finds oneself in darkness illumined only by the knowledge that one understands nothing. Emerson began philosophizing with such wonder and in the philosophical darkness of the Enlightenment. Strauss writes, “When he engages in the study of classical philosophy he must know that he embarks on a journey whose end is completely hidden from him. He is not likely to return to the shores of our time as exactly the same man who departed from them” (“On a New Interpretation” 331).

All esoteric interpretation, as Kermode states, necessarily presumes the inadequacy of one’s predecessors in its arguments (16). In this investigation, I necessarily presume the inadequacy of many of my predecessors who mistake Emerson’s merely salutary exoteric teachings for his true teachings. My primary aim, however, is not to refute scholarly interpretations of Emerson as either a transcendentalist or a reformer but, by introducing a new way of considering Emerson, to show how and why these views are limiting and inaccurate. What is presented here, therefore, is a kind of

prolegomena to a reading of Emerson. By bringing to the surface his political and philosophical esotericism, I demonstrate that Emerson was not only a more serious, interesting, and systematic thinker than most have thought, but that his thinking is more “dangerous” than even Yvor Winters, who argued that Emerson’s mystical romanticism had a damaging influence on American literature, thought. If Emerson is the writer and thinker I claim he is, we will be obliged to reconsider much of the tradition of American literature.

In my discussion of Emerson as a political philosopher, I seek to explain how and why he dissembles; where and how he learned the ancient art of exo-esotericism and the tactics of the fable, the parable, and the *pious fraud*; how he seeks to create a proper audience for his political philosophy; his relations to the laws and customs of his nation and to genuine philosophy; his belief concerning the unbridgeable gap between the inspired few and the vulgar many; his thoughts on such “Nietzschean” themes as “order or rank” and on such “Platonist” themes as “the best regime;” and his “doctrinal adhesion” to the philosophical faith and practice of his philosophical “friends.”

While I use a “Straussian” methodology, I do so critically and with an awareness that such a methodology provokes prejudices in readers. Bagley notes that since the history of esotericism includes occultists, alchemists, kabbalists, freemasons, numerologists, poets, mystics, and astrologers, “in almost every case the contention that a book or doctrine contains an esoteric or arcane message generates controversy. But perhaps nowhere is the subject more controversial than in the suggestion that esotericism was practiced by philosophers of the past” (231). Robert Howse, in “Reading Between the Lines: Exotericism, Esotericism, and the Philosophical Rhetoric of Leo Strauss,”

writes of Strauss's notorious "rediscovery" of esotericism, "Perhaps no element of Leo Strauss's teaching has more engaged the ire of his enemies, or focused their criticism, than his apparent view that the great philosophic texts of the past are, mostly, written in a code or cipher that is accessible only to an initiated few" (60). Laurence Lampert, in "Nietzsche, the History of Philosophy, and Esotericism," writes, "Esotericism is somewhat repugnant or repellent to contemporary scholarship" because 1) the idea of willful deception or even of the need to hide seems "*morally* suspicious," cowardly, or elitist; 2) it seems "*intellectually* suspicious" because of its association with the occult, alchemy, astrology, magic, and other odd and secret teachings; and 3) it is *politically* suspicious because of its links to Straussianism (137-38). However, only a method like Strauss's for reading political philosophers can break the hermeneutic spell of both appreciative and historicizing readings of Emerson and only a method such as Strauss's can illuminate what Emerson has written "between the lines." My ends, however, are distinctly un-Straussian, for this work is part of a larger project whose goal is to help in the creation of a communist theory of esotericism that can turn critical theorists of the Left into worthy foes of the philosophical Right.

In the chapters that follow, I explore the methods of esoteric writing and the problems an interpretation of such writing presents. Chapter 2 situates Emerson as a practitioner of the art of esotericism and reviews statements by critics whose awareness of contradiction and inconsistency in Emerson's rhetoric and politics does not lead to a useful illumination of these problems and their relationship to Emerson's thought. Chapter 3 investigates Emerson's theories of rhetoric and eloquence alongside those of his rhetoric teacher, Edward T. Channing, Emerson's student-at-a-distance, Nietzsche,

and Strauss's considerations of Nietzsche, the Nazis, and the rhetoric of nihilism. It also examines Emerson's earliest writings and lectures (his "provisional" or "initiator" teachings) for how they begin to establish the themes of Emerson's political philosophy. Chapter 4 explores Coleridge's *The Friend* for what Emerson seems to have learned from it concerning the prudent means of conveying dangerous truths to different audiences simultaneously. Chapter 5 examines Emerson's theories of books, of reading, of writing as acts of dæmonic possession by exploring the theories of the dæmonic in ancient philosophy and in Plutarch's "On Socrates' Dæmon." Chapter 6 explores Bacon's writings, especially *The Wisdom of the Ancients* and *The Advancement of Learning*, and their impact on the political philosophy of the anonymously published *Nature*. Each of these chapters works toward understanding how Emerson integrated his reading into his writing and how he sought to create an audience of "individuals" as disciples who might reject the teachings of modern philosophy, democracy, and the Enlightenment and in the process learn to understand nature (and human nature) differently and give new value to human life.

CHAPTER 2 AMERICAN ESOTERICISM

Standard Received Emerson and the Problem of Emerson's Esoteric Rhetoric

Every book is written with a constant secret reference to the few intelligent persons whom the writer believes to exist in the million.

—Emerson, “Progress of Culture” (W 8:208)

But in all works of human art, there is deduction to be made for blunder & swindle.

—Emerson (TN 1:30)

Nobody is afraid of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Like Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, Emerson seems familiar to students, scholars, and shoppers alike. Whether some selection from his writings appears on a syllabus, some contemporary poet, philosopher, or essayist performs a paean to him, his words grace a greeting card or testify that buying a particular product proves one's nonconformity and individuality, or his visage appears on a coffee mug or a bookstore's shopping bag, most think of him as a familiar, innocent spirit presiding over American letters and democratic liberalism with nothing to hide. What if, however, the perpetually renewed set of standard received interpretations, images, and feelings about Emerson is not merely clichéd but wrong? What if those contradictory ideas about Emerson, those promulgated by expansionists and robber barons as self-justifications, by think-and-grow-rich advocates, as well as those circulated by teachers of survey courses, new-age spiritualists, ecologists, poets, and romantics are each, despite their glaring differences, equally plausible readings by differently-constructed audiences of the exoteric level of Emerson's corpus? What if

there is an altogether different Emerson—an esoteric Emerson—concealed beneath these strangely coexisting canonized and trivialized versions of Emerson? Should such an Emerson exist, we would have to drastically reevaluate the history of American literature.

Admiring Emerson's writings for what they seem to confirm about the Enlightenment ideals of the American regime, or for reminding us of what we wish to think about ourselves as individuals, many consider Emerson a handy dispenser of wise advice and untroubling meditations. Dutifully acknowledged as a central figure in the American Renaissance and in the American canon of literature and philosophical thought, Emerson is appreciated though rarely read as a careful or serious thinker. Many recall Emerson as the pantheistic Concord Sage who worshipped nature, who was an advocate of self-reliance and American democracy, but whose primary importance was his influence on Henry David Thoreau or Edwin Arlington Robinson or Wallace Stevens or Hart Crane or some other writer considered more complicated or interesting.

American philosopher Stanley Cavell remarks, "*Almost* everyone gets around to condescending to Emerson" (59). Philip Nicoloff writes, "The term 'Emersonian' does not snarl portentously on the page as do 'Nietzschean' or 'Spenglerian'; rather it carries with it . . . an aura of bland impracticability, of something quite harmless and perhaps permanently outdated" (5). In this dissertation, I argue that "Emerson" is neither harmless nor outdated, that he is not a thinker to whom it is safe to condescend, and that the term "Emersonian" has as little to do with his teachings as the term "Platonism" (as it is commonly bandied about) has to do with Plato or as the term "deconstruction" (which now seems to mean "to disassemble" instead of referring to an ontology of alterity) has to do with Derrida. I seek not, perhaps, to make the Yankee Plato snarl but to recognize as

snarls what others mistake as passive purring. I argue that it is possible, after such long familiarity, to experience uncertainty or trepidation about Emerson the man as well as the term “Emersonian” and to recognize, even at this late date, that Emerson was not only an extremely cautious writer (and not “poetic” or “mystical”) but an esoteric political philosopher whose ancient agenda is not merely Platonist but outdoes the “Nietzschean” where it does not merely precede “Nietzsche.”

As Lawrence Buell notes in “The Emerson Industry in the 1980s: A Survey of Trends and Achievements,” the process of “de-Transcendentalizing” Emerson by historicizing his thought has made considerable changes to our understanding of Emerson, his politics, and his philosophy.¹ Though not all of these new trends help us understand *Emerson* better, since they follow current critical fashion more closely than they adhere to Emerson’s thinking, this process has usefully engaged Emerson’s thought both for what influenced it and for what it influenced. Though it has long been known that perhaps the most politically and philosophically significant instance of Emersonian influence was on Friedrich Nietzsche, except for a few provocative essays in German and English published around World War II, this relationship has only recently re-attracted scholarly attention. Though the silence that constituted the Emerson-Nietzsche relationship has ended, the new scholarly noise, while examining Emerson’s philosophy and clarifying what Emerson Nietzsche read, when he read it, and how he incorporated it (or was incorporated by it), does little to get at the nature of Emerson’s political philosophy and project or how it was further developed not merely in Nietzsche but in

¹ Buell notes the massive increase in Emerson scholarship from the 1960s to the 1980s and its increasing specialization. He predicts, “the best work on Emerson will thus become more precise, more subtle, more deeply if less broadly informed than ever before” (118).

those Nietzsche influenced. (This is not to say that a certain Emerson has not been perceived behind the existentialist and the post-structuralist Nietzsches, but, in my opinion, neither these Nietzsches nor these Emersons gets at the essence of either's political philosophy.) If Emerson (and Nietzsche) shares political, philosophical, and rhetorical characteristics with the tradition of esoteric Platonist political philosophy, a political reading of the rhetoric of Emerson's philosophy must not attempt to do away with his ambiguity, his problematic tone, his combinations of gravity and levity, his apparent contradictions, or the deceptions of his seemingly evolutionary progress of thinking. Instead, these ought to be the places to grapple with him, if not pin him down.

Laurence Lampert, in *Nietzsche and Modern Times*, identifies three main principles of Nietzsche's understanding of the history of philosophy, which I contend Emerson shared: 1) "The greatest thoughts are the greatest events" (BGE 285); 2) "Genuine philosophers are commanders and legislators" (BGE 211); and 3) "The difference between exoteric and esoteric [was] formerly known to philosophers" (BGE 30) (Lampert 1). In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche questions the value of truth and the will to truth. He seeks a "higher and more fundamental value for life" than the faith of metaphysicians, and he seeks it by waiting "for the advent of a new species of philosophers . . . philosophers of the dangerous 'maybe'" (BGE 2). Nietzsche and Emerson both learned such Pyrrhonism from Montaigne. As Dudley M. Marchi notes, they also learned from Montaigne how to use tradition freely and how to tamper with the past according to their understandings of it (104). Each knows that truth can be destructive and deception can be life preserving. As Stanley Rosen writes, and this applies equally to Emerson, "Nietzsche's Platonism amounts to the conviction that he

understands human nature and how it is to be transformed by the philosopher in his role as prophet and lawgiver" (*Mask* x). Nietzsche's (like Emerson's) noble nihilism, his "celebration of the heroic ages of the past as paradigms," Rosen writes, is "intended to justify the destruction of the present decadent epoch" (*Mask* xi).

When the war of each against all is reduced in the Hobbesian state to self-preservation, we enter, according to Nietzsche, the age of the Last Man. In the section of *Beyond Good and Evil* called "What is Noble," Nietzsche writes:

Every enhancement of the type "man" has so far been the work of an aristocratic society—and it will be so again and again—a society that believes in the long ladder of an order of rank and differences in value between man and man, and that needs slavery in some sense or other. (BGE 257)

Without the "pathos of distance" that grows out of the ingrained difference between social strata, there can be no greatness of culture. "One should not yield to humanitarian illusions about the origins of an aristocratic society," Nietzsche writes: "truth is hard." The truth, for Nietzsche, about the origin of societies is that natural barbarians hurled themselves on weaker, more peaceful and civilized people, yet these original heroic aristocracies, infected with slave mentality, surrendered their privileges instead of accepting "with a good conscience the sacrifice of untold human beings who, *for its sake*, must be reduced and lowered to incomplete human beings, to slaves, to instruments" (BGE 258). What counts conventionally as good manners—"refraining mutually from injury, violence, and exploitation"—is only truly good in an aristocratic society of true equals with a "sophisticated concept of friendship" who understand the "necessity for having enemies" (BGE 260). For Nietzsche, "life itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation" (BGE 259).

However, too often the master morality of the ruling class succumbs to the disease of slave morality and forgets what is good, honorable, and valuable in itself (BGE 260). For Nietzsche, the heroic philosopher must become a lawgiver:

The noble human being must force himself, with the aid of history, to recognize that, since time immemorial, in all somehow dependent social strata the common man *was* only what he was *considered*: not at all used to positing values himself, he also attached no other value to himself than his masters attached to him (it is the characteristic *right of masters* to create values). (BGE 261)

In “the democratic order of things,” however, masters and slaves intermingle and intermarry, and this “slave in the blood” marks the turn toward the end of history and the age of the last man.

For Nietzsche, and his teacher-at-a-distance Emerson, “an *instinct for rank*” is “a sign of a *high rank*” (BGE 263). In order to protect this instinct from being debased by the slave mentality, heroes and armies must be educated by means of books, which “require some external tyranny of authority for their protection in order to gain those millennia of *persistence* which are necessary to exhaust them and figure them out” (BGE 263). And here, in Nietzsche, we get a good glimpse of Emerson’s exoteric method, his spiritual laws:

Much is gained once the feeling has finally been cultivated in the masses (among the shallow and in the high-speed intestines of every kind) that they are not to touch everything; that there are holy experiences before which they have to take off their shoes and keep away their unclean hands. (BGE 263)

Education and culture, and therefore philosophy, “*have to be essentially the art of deceiving*” (BGE 264). The philosopher must learn to write and educate by means of indirection. “Does one not write books precisely to conceal what one harbors?”

Nietzsche asks (BGE 289). Philosophers, Nietzsche agrees with Plato, never express their real and ultimate opinions in books. To read philosophy properly is to understand

this. It is to begin by assuming that “every philosophy also *conceals* a philosophy; every opinion is also a hideout, every word also a mask” (BGE 289). To be great, Emerson winks, is to be misunderstood. Nietzsche concurs: “Every profound thinker is more afraid of being understood than of being misunderstood” (BGE 290).

To be noble, however, is less about the fear of being understood and more about the right not to be understood. Esotericism is a mark of aristocracy, a sign of being “in the know.” As Nietzsche writes, the noble soul is marked by “egoism,” a certain “unshakable faith that to a being such as ‘we are’ other beings must be subordinate by nature and have to sacrifice themselves. The noble soul accepts this fact of its egotism without any question mark.” This feeling of nobility ought to be natural, a part of the primordial law of things—“it is justice itself” (BGE 265). Since political philosophers are rarely military or popular heroes who can shun the mores of civil society and since they do not live in a world of equals and could face persecution, execution, or exile for their noble truths, concealment is a necessary practice. Leo Strauss writes,

if a wise man is silent about a fact that is commonly held to be important for the subject he discusses, he gives us to understand that that fact is unimportant. The silence of a wise man is always meaningful. It cannot be explained by forgetfulness. . . . One can express one’s disagreement with the common view by simply failing to take notice of it; this is, in fact, the most effective way of showing one’s disapproval. (Strauss, TOM 30)

“To speak the truth,” Emerson writes, “even with some austerity,” to be temperate and generous, ought to make “common good-nature” sympathetic to the wise man, yet he more often must face abstinence, debt, solitude, and unpopularity. It behooves the wise man, says Emerson, to study danger and death.

Though “more freedom exists for culture” in “this country and at this hour,” so that one speaking the truth does not “run against an axe at the first step out of the beaten

track of opinion,” Emerson writes, “whoso is heroic will always find crises to try his edge” (W 2:246-47). The possibility of persecution is perpetual: “Human virtue” it seems “demands her champions and martyrs, and the trial of persecution always proceeds” (W 2:247). The persecution of philosophers could return “easily in a republic, if there appear any signs of a decay of religion.” Whoso is heroic, therefore, must have stratagems to deal with the inevitability that “the next newspaper” or “a sufficient number of his neighbors” could decide “to pronounce his opinions incendiary” (W 2:245).

For Nietzsche, there are two types of genius: the one who begets or wants to beget (BGE 206), and the one “who prefers being fertilized and giving birth” (BGE 248). Emerson seems to desire to be both—a student in a long line of students and a teacher in a long line of teachers reaching out towards the future—a kind of philosophical daisy chain. Using an esoteric rhetoric, these philosophers intend their art to act as a stimulus for the few and a narcotic for the many. Nietzsche declares war on the arrogance of modern scientific, positivist ideas, especially those of Kant (BGE 12), and advocates the Platonic or noble way of thinking which is able to resist obvious sense evidence (BGE 14). He advocates caution and fashioning an appearance of being unphilosophical (BGE 18): “Our highest insights must—and should—sound like follies and sometimes like crimes when they are heard without permission by those who are not predisposed and predestined for them” (BGE 30). The difference between the exoteric and the esoteric can only be understood, Nietzsche proclaims, by those philosophers who believe in “order of rank and *not* in equality and equal rights” (BGE 30). The exoteric approach of modern philosophy reduces things to their lowest common denominator, “sees things from below,” but “the esoteric looks *down from above*.” “What serves the higher type of

men as nourishment or delectation must almost be poison for a very different and inferior type,” writes Nietzsche.

Michael Lopez notes, in his introduction to a special double issue of *ESQ* on Emerson and Nietzsche (1998), that in the past readers of Emerson have been hesitant to associate his name with the syphilitic, proto-Nazi, German madman, and readers of Nietzsche refused to pay attention to Nietzsche’s obvious obsession with Emerson—the sickly-sweet, moon-shiny, sentimental, genteel American. Even as this attitude is changing, the emphasis on Emerson’s and Nietzsche’s similarities of style and attitudes toward Christian morality, individualism, the Over-Soul and the *Übermensch*, fate, and history focuses on rather superficial—or exoteric—elements and does not get at what each consider his true—or esoteric—teachings. It is not difficult to find affinities, but rarely does the investigation go any deeper.

In *Emerson and Power: Creative Antagonism in the Nineteenth Century*, Lopez argues that Emerson was “Nietzschean” before Nietzsche. The important insights Lopez gains into Emerson by approaching him as a pre-Nietzschean philosopher of power, however, are mitigated by his historicizing of Emerson’s thought (and Nietzsche’s) merely within the context of the nineteenth century, with its obsessions with war, revolution, empire, and industrial expansion. His de-Transcendentalizing attempt to divert attention away from the traditional, canonical, pedagogical image of Emerson as a preacher of the gospel of affirmation and self-reliance fails to recognize Emerson’s ancient politics.

Lopez, in arguing (alongside Harold Bloom) that “power” is at the center of Emerson’s thought, attempts to disengage Emerson from Platonism. However, Lopez is

guilty of the same crime he accuses others of: while others assume they “know” Emerson, Lopez assumes he knows what “Platonism” is. For him, Platonism and transcendentalism are synonymous in that both seek to ascend from this world of woe to the world of ideas. This, however, is, as Kermode would say, an outsider’s interpretation of Platonism. If Plato (and those who philosophize in his tradition) never really “means” what the text says, Platonism, as an esoteric political philosophy, is no more about any of the usual things one associates with Plato than Emersonianism is. While Lopez makes much of the connections between Nietzsche and Emerson, he ignores what both—as esoteric political philosophers—owe the ancients. For both Nietzsche and Emerson, Platonism is the attempt to fashion a new race of human beings through writing—writing whose esoteric content is only discernible by those who will arise by natural right to rule.

Lopez finds critics always asking themselves if Emerson really intends all he implies. Lopez brilliantly transforms this “the double take” into a critical concept and nominates it as one of *the* classic critical reactions to Emerson (118-19). For Lopez, “Emerson’s essays are dialectical—contrapuntal explorations of contradictory viewpoints or states of mind” (94), and his readings, in this regard, are accurate. His Burkean approach to Emerson’s writings from the angle of power, however, does not finally comprehend the nature of Emerson’s dialectic, though Lopez at least is aware that Emerson is more strategic and less dilettantish than some have thought. Lopez’s Foucauldian perspective on power and his poststructuralist Nietzschean perspective on Emerson’s “rhetorical and logical perversity” are also both too limited to the “self” and cannot account for Emerson’s deployment of the rhetoric of esotericism for social ends

(62, 89). Lopez does rightly point out, however, that any good reading of Emerson must address the problem of Emerson's "potentially irreverent, half-facetious tone" (118).

Lopez quotes William Gass and Oliver Wendall Holmes where they feel flummoxed by Emerson's inconsistency, exaggeration, hyperbole, his "willful avoidance of connections, qualifications, explanation," and his "overstatement, extravagance, paradox, eccentricity" (117). Some critics have tried to account for these, Lopez points out, by arguing the written text cannot fully reflect Emerson's oral delivery. Others, such as Cavell, who privilege the written text, Lopez notes, see Emerson hiding his audacities by his "genteel surface," or, like Quentin Anderson, feel he conceals his extravagance in the texture of his prose. Others Lopez does not mention, such as Christopher Lasch, in *The True and Only Heaven*, simply decide upon a side of Emerson's contradictions that best suits their argument. For Lasch, Emerson's exoteric praise of self-reliance and the work ethic makes him a spiritual godfather for a renewed populist republicanism or libertarianism (261ff). These quasi-interpretations, which assume Emerson's contradictions have no solution, begin, by their own admission, on the outside and from a position of defeat before the engagement has begun. Such readings tend "to tone down, ignore, or explain away the hard edges and extremes of Emerson's thought" (Lopez, *Emerson* x).

The dialectical and paradoxical Emerson who uses contradiction and a rhetoric of war that emerges in Lopez's book is certainly a vast improvement on the idealist, genteel Emerson of older criticism, but to say that "war" as a concept is indispensable to both Emerson and Nietzsche is one thing; explaining why is it indispensable as more than a rhetorical device is another. Lopez fails to do that. For Lopez, Emerson as a nineteenth

century philosopher of power is still concerned above all with “the self.” While I admire his close readings and traditional methods that connect Emerson to the history of ideas, I think Lopez’s historical boundaries are too narrow and his understanding of the theory and practice of political philosophy insufficient for a proper understanding of Emerson.

Most, Lopez included, do not believe Emerson ever intends all that he implies. Lopez relents, noting that it is difficult to finally “pin Emerson down rhetorically” or “to pin him down philosophically” (163). Therefore Lopez resorts to historicizing Emerson, locating him “in a long tradition of nineteenth-century thought that views the world as the balancing and conflict of powers—spiritual or intellectual capacities as well as brute force,” a tradition preoccupied with will, action, and martial virtues—as if the nineteenth century were the only century to have such obsessions. He contends that Emerson’s “failure” to achieve “ultimate synthesis” has less to do with the man Emerson than with the “mid-nineteenth-century failure to achieve any such philosophical synthesis” and that century’s “double consciousness” (139, 149, 155)—as if Emerson, a student of the ancients and the Platonists, was limited by his own historical moment and could not use these historical “failures” strategically—as if Emerson did not know what he was doing.

My argument about Emerson as a political philosopher and my disagreements with Lopez’s book—certainly among the best recent Emerson scholarship—is similar to David Lewis Schaefer’s arguments about Montaigne and Montaigne scholars in his *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne*. Schaefer writes that most critics never think to question Montaigne’s “honesty” or “good faith,” and they feel that to do so would be to accuse Montaigne of “moral turpitude.” Schaefer writes, “But in seeking to elevate Montaigne’s moral stature, these apologists lower his intellectual rank: he becomes the

author of an amusing but dilettantish and philosophically flawed work, full of errors, inconsistencies, and superstitions, reflecting the backwardness of this time" (23).

Schaefer quotes Villey (who argues as Lopez does): "the men of the sixteenth century do not know how to compose." By arguing from contemporary textual and historicist literary theories, most critics, who claim writers such as Montaigne—or Emerson—cannot transcend their historical milieu, says Schaefer, begin with the assumption that present-day readers cannot learn anything from the *Essays* that they do not already know.

George Stack's *Nietzsche and Emerson: An Elective Affinity* (1992) is the most sustained effort in English to explore the extent and depth of the relation between these two "literary philosophers" who are often criticized for being contradictory or self-contradictory (vii, ix). Stack bemoans the fact that though many have noticed affinities between Emerson and Nietzsche,

there has been no serious effort made to display in detail the philosophical and valuational lines of influence that closely link the American poet and essayist who is deemed the quintessential American writer and thinker (or, as Harold Bloom has said, 'our central man') and the iconoclastic nineteenth-century German philosopher. (2)

This "deep one-way relationship," Stack says, is "an intellectual and spiritual relationship so profound and pervasive that the word *influence* doesn't do justice to it" (3). Stack, however, does little more than add to the list of affinities of style, tone, and themes. Stack argues that Nietzsche's "Dionysian pessimism" is related to Emerson's "tragic optimism," that Nietzsche's "idolization of creative geniuses and his contempt for mediocrity" comes more from Emerson than from Schopenhauer (6), that Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* is derived from Emerson's writing about the scholars to come, and that Nietzsche adopted his "Olympian aristocratic tone," his arrogance and

uncompromising elitism from Emerson (8). Stack finds a host of affinities between the two on the issues they discuss most openly: fate, power, circularity, illusions, good and evil, and so on.

Stack's analysis is limited in the main because he reads Nietzsche as an existentialist for whom ("Emersonian") non-conformity, self-trust, and self-reliance are the key issues. However, his study does uncover many important points that should not be overlooked. Stack points out that "Nietzsche rarely traveled without his Emerson" and that Emerson's *Essays* were "the most frequently read books in his library" (3).² There are over one hundred direct or indirect references to Emerson in Nietzsche's published and unpublished writings over a twenty-six year period (3). As Stack and other scholars have discovered, Nietzsche's copies of Emerson are filled with enthusiastic and uncritical underlined passages and marginalia (often a mere "Ja!!"), but Stack argues that "Nietzsche was probably the most thorough and accurate interpreter of the thought of Emerson extant (viii).

Because Nietzsche's indebtedness to Emerson has been so consistently underestimated, Stack correctly points out, we have failed to understand how Emerson's thought, assimilated by Nietzsche, entered European philosophy and politics and significantly influenced its course (x). Stack also usefully points out that Nietzsche admired and imitated Emerson's aphoristic style, that Emerson served as Nietzsche's alter ego, and that "Emerson served as Socrates to Nietzsche's Plato" (viii, 5). Stack

² Nietzsche owned *R. W. Emerson's Essays* (Hannover, 1858), translated by G. Fabricius, *Die Fuehrung des Lebens, Gedanken und Studien* (Leipzig, 1862), translated by E. Sartorius, *Emerson: Neue Essays* (Leipzig, 1876), translated by Julian Schmidt, and *Essay ueber Goethe und Shakespeare* (Leipzig, 1857), translated by H. Grimm (Stack 42).

writes that Emerson tempted Nietzsche to be “a dangerous thinker, to write dangerously,” and that both wanted “to transcend language, to experience life fully, to immerse themselves in the stream of life,” but this issue of style—of writing—also needs to be taken more seriously, as I aim to do here (viii, ix).

Stack’s analysis is best where he discusses Emerson’s influence on Nietzsche’s thinking concerning nihilism. Stack writes, “Emerson was the first thinker to instill in Nietzsche’s mind that Western man is at a promising, but dangerous, crossroad” (36). For both Emerson and Nietzsche, Stack argues, this nihilism points to the necessity of initiating a new morality, or reevaluating cultural values, of instituting a higher culture premised on order of rank, or what Emerson called “scale of rank” (37-38). Both men unpitifully considered the masses a herd and uncompromisingly sought to awaken a natural aristocracy (269). While Stack waffles, calling Emerson’s “great men” merely “rule-breakers,” and portrays Emerson and Nietzsche as merely antinomian, he recognizes that both understand the good of evil and anticipate the end of history and the consequences of the age of the Last Man (249). Stack writes,

This is what is revolutionary in Emerson’s and Nietzsche’s visionary cultural ideal: the idea of the creation of a cultural system that is not based on brute force, inherited social status, wealth, stealth, deviousness, cunning, tradition, group sentiments, social contract, class interest, custom, kinship, or economic self-interest, but on the basis of *character*. Power in society ought to be in the hands of “the best” or those who do not crave power. The *aristoi* would not be political rulers or leaders, but bellwethers, shepherds. (299)

While I cannot agree with everything in Stack’s mixture of political notions from incompatible registers, his conclusion is sound, as are his readings of Emerson and Nietzsche that focus on their advocacy of breeding and teaching an ideal aristocracy by means of culture. Stack, who seems to think Emerson and Nietzsche wish to have

nothing to do with stealth, deviousness, or cunning, does, however, come close to seeing both as esotericists when he writes, "Nietzsche follows Emerson's views so closely that he adopts his archly presented suggestions that exemplary 'law-giving' individuals need not conform to conventional conceptions of morality" (302).

Whenever Nietzsche and Emerson have been compared, the better of the pair is usually Nietzsche. However, focusing on these two philosophical friends—the teacher who never knew his student, the student whose radicalization of this teacher's thoughts promises to bring about "a crisis without equal on earth," to create "*great politics*" (*Ecce* 326-27)—merely as an example of influence or shared ideas and styles blinds us to their shared political project and what each owed the ancients. Emerson and Nietzsche knew their times were not ready for them. Their "spermatic" texts (J 5:508) were calculated to provide posthumous births (Nietzsche, *Ecce* 259). That Nietzsche was born posthumously before Emerson, at least on the battlefields, in politics, and in the academy, only means that Emerson is still waiting to be reborn, or that he has been reborn several times yet has never been recognized as "Emerson."

Emerson and Nietzsche, like Montaigne and Bacon before them, wrote for men of understanding. As fishers of men, they mobilized parables, and they knew how to weave silence into their texts. Emerson believed one could train oneself in the arts of rhetoric in order to transform opposition into opportunity. One who possesses (or is possessed by) eloquence, says Emerson, is like the phoenix, for he "cannot be defeated or put down. There is a principle of resurrection in him, an immortality of purpose" (W 7:95-96). Nietzsche proclaims his writings "fish hooks," and if they fail to catch anything, he is not to blame: it is a fault of the times—"There were no fish" (*Ecce* 310). Both wrote from

inspiration they described as rapturous, dæmonic, and life-altering, and both knew their translations of these inspirations could only be heard by those with ears to hear, by those whose destiny makes them members of an ancient philosophical community without community, “a link in the chain of a venerable tradition” (Strauss, PAW 188).

Like Montaigne, Emerson insinuates that to understand him requires careful study. An inattentive reader will fail to make sense of one who claims to follow his whims, to always be insincere, and who only hints at the ends he thinks best. As with Montaigne who complains that those who admire his style slight his matter, much of the praise afforded Emerson is for qualities that are, according to both, neither praiseworthy nor important. Much of the blame heaped on each for his inconsistency, naïveté, and contradictions fails to recognize a stratagem as a stratagem. Emerson’s interpreters, therefore, often leave the scotomized political intentions of his writing invisible. Far from being either politically progressive or subversive, his thoughts on nature, science, society, and industry contain scathing critiques of popular or modern democracy and its deviation from the ancients who understood the necessity of the noble lie, of custom, and of tradition in a *polis*, of a sovereign, of human limits, and who sought to order society according to the hierarchical laws of nature.

Like Montaigne and Montaigne’s friend La Boetie, Emerson often conspicuously demonstrates loyalty to the democratic laws and opinions of his republican regime (in “Aristocracy” Emerson calls this loyalty a duty [W 10:59]), but this hardly means he believes them to be the best or true. In order to avoid possible persecution from those he might offend, or from “men of understanding” unsympathetic to his purpose, Emerson often pays lip service to the customs, opinions, reforms, and laws of his nation, offering

himself as a patriotic critic of American democracy and a believing skeptic of received religion. Yet, he makes such statements with a certain ambiguity.³ Deploying ancient rhetorical stratagems, Emerson persuades the majority of his readers that he is on their side and has their interests at heart. By these means, he escapes suspicion. Subtly drawing his readers' ire toward defects in the nature of a democratic, egalitarian society, Emerson can get them to regard their dissatisfactions as their own, not something placed in them from without. Training his less careful readers to consider him a thinker of mythopoetic thoughts, he gets them to ignore or misread his political intentions. Following Montaigne's lead, Emerson denies he has any prudence. By praising sincerity, honesty, and self-reliance, he can mobilize the noble lie (*pious fraus*) without detection.

Emerson did not collect his essays and lectures into a single book, and there is no one place in his corpus where one might discover Emerson's indication of how he wishes to be read. Nor can we simply by looking over the headings of the essays and lectures determine an evolutionary path of Emerson's reflections, for there are texts on nature, literature, politics, history, love, friendship, religion, manners, biography, travel, aesthetics, rhetoric, education, slavery, philosophy, and many other topics. Within these there are digressions and contradictory statements. Sometimes the announced topic of an essay or lecture is not central to Emerson's meditations in it. Even when the relation of

³ In his essay "Of Friendship," Montaigne, writing about the misuse of his friend La Boétie's essay *On Voluntary Servitude* by Protestant anti-monarchical reformers, argues that La Boétie's argument was against tyranny, not monarchy (which for the ancients was closest to the best regime). Those radicals, Montaigne writes, "aim at disturbing and changing the condition of our government, without troubling themselves to think whether they are likely to improve it" (1:28.198). La Boétie's essay was, Montaigne asserts, a boyhood exercise upon "a common theme that has been tumbled and tossed by a thousand writers," and its theme is honest, for its writer "would not so much as lie in jest," for he held as his maxim, "sovereignly imprinted in his soul, very religiously to obey and submit to the laws under which he was born" (1:28.199).

the text's title and its overall theme seem to coincide, Emerson's thinking—sentence by sentence—moves swiftly about (*epitrochasmus*), taking his readers in one direction only to leave them facing another. Emerson's multi-leveled writing is calculated in its consideration of its different audiences, and his seemingly careless scattering of thoughts on various topics is, perhaps, a studied carelessness.

One way to negotiate Emerson's maze is to read him as more ancient than modern, more a Platonist than a Kantian, more an initiate of the ancient mysteries than an advocate of modern reforms. Emerson does not intend to be understood by the common and vulgar as he understands himself. By cloaking his secret thoughts in the guise of moral *sententiae* and poetic randomness, and by seemingly idealizing, aestheticizing, and spiritualizing the political, Emerson can satisfy the many who read quickly or listen distractedly, gain an audience and a popularity to guarantee his livelihood as a public philosopher, secure the possibility that he may find his way into the minds of more careful listeners and readers, and ensure that he will live posthumously.

Rhetorical Difficulties

In rhetoric, this art of omission is a chief secret of power.

—Emerson, "Beauty" (W 6:279)

Readers of Emerson have often claimed that his ambiguities, his poetic imprecision, his incomplete or secondhand knowledge of philosophy, and his irregularities make him a "bad" writer and thinker, that his diffuse, repetitious texts lack clarity and organization. Many, assuming they knew what good writing is, such as Matthew Arnold, have thrown up their hands at Emerson's "unsound" style or claimed, as Henry James did, that Emerson never found a proper form. As Michael Lopez notes in *Emerson and Power*, the Emerson industry has remained perplexed about whether to over

schematize Emerson's writings to account for his apparent inconsistencies or to make illogical assumptions in trying to fit Emerson's texts into some kind of evolutionary paradigm (48).⁴

Walter Blair and Clarence Faust, in "Emerson's Literary Method," argue that a careful study of Emerson's method reveals that his writings lose their apparent lack of unity and order only when Emerson's Platonism is taken into account. Reading Emerson's remark in "Plato; or the Philosopher" about "the twice bisected line" being the "key" to Plato's method, Blair and Faust argue that the same key can unlock Emerson's method. They find that Emerson's writings are always multileveled, moving between the visible world and the intelligible world and within these between objects and images (corresponding to faith and conjecture) and truths and opinions (reason and understanding). Emerson "was bound," they write, "to treat any subject in such a way as to relate it both to that which was above it and to that which was below it in the scale of being represented by the twice bisected line" (81).

There are several other ways to account for apparent contradictions in a writer's corpus. The differences and contradictions throughout the corpus could reflect: 1) a development of ideas, or 2) differences of emphasis; 3) they could provide multiple perspectives which are ultimately resolved by a unified perspective, or 4) they could be a sequence of perspectives that move from partial understandings to a more complete or

⁴ David Van Leer, in *Emerson's Epistemology: The Argument of the Essays*, writes that Emerson has often been attacked for his "insufficient knowledge of philosophy in general and German idealism in particular" (3) and has been accused of misunderstanding both the purpose and the tone of the Kantian project (3-4). Thus, he argues, "The study of Emerson's sources, then, is not so much a dead issue as a lost cause: a project that even under ideal circumstances could not address the real issues of Emerson's philosophical understanding" (6).

final understanding. However, 5) if a writer is (or is suspected of being) a political philosopher, it is perhaps best to dismiss any evolutionary paradigm and read contradictions within the corpus as conscious, intentional, and calculated (see Galston 200-202). It is best to read ambiguities as hints, for as Emerson writes in "Inspiration," "every word admits a new use, and hints ulterior motives" (W 8:278).

Emerson relies on several rhetorical stratagems to reveal and conceal his intent. He often uses *significatio* (to imply more than is said) in his most quotable passages, especially those treating the self-reliant individual or the One Mind. While exoterically *significatio* creates emphasis by hyperbole ("Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist" ["Self-Reliance," W 2:51]), esoterically it emphasizes by omission (what does it mean to be a nonconformist in a democratic regime?). *Significatio* is a figure, like the enthymeme (see Aristotle's *Rhetoric* 1357a15-20), that forces the audience to guess at what is not said, a figure whose intended perlocutionary effect is to invite the audience to become complicit with the writer in determining a meaning or to seduce an audience so it becomes one's accomplice in completing one's intention. Esoteric rhetorical stratagems thus serve to divide Emerson's audience, for those not "in the know" are likely to jump to the most obvious or exoteric conclusions. He perhaps uses *adianoeta* (an expression with an obvious meaning and an unsuspected secret one beneath) in "History," for example, which begins "There is one mind common to all individual men"—for what does Emerson mean by "individual men" (W 2:9)? Such stratagems serve as a test to determine who might be a friend capable of sharing Emerson's most secret thoughts. As readers of Emerson, we have no right to make what we will of them or their function. Structurally they are like the anteroom of the temple. Initiates who stand disoriented in

the anteroom attempting to understand its architecture and what kinds of rooms it leads into never understand the mysteries until after their initiation.

Emerson is not ignorant of the challenge of his esoteric rhetorical stratagems. Nor is he unaware that those who read quickly, for facts, whose tastes and opinions are shaped by the newspaper, do not possess ears to hear, and that his words will wash over them leaving them as stained with newsprint as they were before. Such statements might give some readers pause, but most will assimilate their meaning—to speak Baconian—into the language of some idol, for they assume they know what Emerson means. They will continue reading, perhaps reading every essay, yet their waters will remain placid and undisturbed. Emerson expects such readers: he has witnessed how his lectures affect the many and the few. He understands the mysteries of eloquence and how to find different levels within an audience. He knows that—potentially—his words will drop like a heavy stone into someone's water, that they will shock and produce circular waves. Such individuals will either understand—by prior study or perhaps naturally—Emerson's words, or Emerson's words will be the charge that sends them on a pilgrimage of study. Emerson knows the lesson of political philosophy that truth unveiled is dangerous both to those who hear it and to those who speak it. Thus, he speaks in code knowing that its encryption is difficult but not impossible to break, that one who can submit to the rigors of contemplation with the patience to wait for revelation will master it. As Plato writes in his seventh Epistle, one will not dedicate himself to this difficult task of wisdom unless one is on fire with philosophy and knows that without making this effort life is not worth living. Or, as Bacon notes repeatedly, one cannot gain access to the wisdom of the ancients without suffering (*pathei mathos*).

Emerson deploys a wide range of potentially dissembling rhetorical techniques in nearly all of his writings: *apomnenonysis* (quotation of approved authorities), *apophasis* (pretending to deny what is really affirmed), *apoplanesis* (evading the issue by digressing to distract attention), *aporia* (true or feigned doubt or deliberation), *aposiopesis* (stopping suddenly, leaving a statement unfinished), *epitrochasmus* (swift movement from one statement to another), *noema* or *skotison* (deliberately obscure speech), occultation, concealment, insinuation, and *schematismus* (circuitous speech to conceal a meaning). If we are to get at Emerson's political intentions, we should accept, for now, an enigma as an enigma, for the secrets of a Sphinx can only be discovered after some effort, and to guess too soon is to find oneself facing the Sphinx's razor-sharp claws.

While there is no consensus as to why Emerson's texts are so full of riddles, critics agree riddles are present. Barbara Packer, in *Emerson's Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays*, writes that Emerson did everything he could to make his reader's task difficult. His tone is often indeterminate (7), and he "celebrates the virtues of absence, the exhilarations of discontinuity" (1). His refusals to provide transitions, she argues, are "strategic" (1) and his "Obscurities, enigmas, lacunae—like Biblical parables—are tests of the reader's intelligence and generosity; they serve to divide the elect from the nonelect. The reader can *hear* only those texts, or portions of texts, for which he has ears" (6). "Like some of the parables Jesus tells," she writes, Emerson's texts seem "designed at once to invite misinterpretation and at the same time to radiate scorn for the misinterpreter" (18). Packer continues: "Emerson's tendency from the first is to efface himself, to leave the reader no clues as to how his text is to be privately performed. If his reticence leaves room for the freedom of the reader, it also

invites his distortions and mistakes” (20). Despite her illuminating insights into Emerson’s rhetoric, however, Packer pulls up short on the problem of Emerson’s intention: “Explaining how the strategy works is easier than guessing why it was chosen” (18). Was it not chosen to radiate scorn for the misinterpreter, to invite distortions and mistakes? Would admitting this destroy our beliefs about Emerson?

The great religious traditions have always considered it necessary to maintain multiple systems or levels of teachings. The Hindu tradition designates religious education and practice according to caste, distinguishing between the path of works, faith, knowledge, and wisdom. The Buddha, whose teachings were open to all castes, taught using multi-leveled “skilful means” (Skt: *upāya*; Jpn: *hōben*), teaching the many the path of right action while leading the few to the path of wisdom, meditation, and the renunciation of desire. Both the Koran and the New Testament describe how teaching in parables separates believers from nonbelievers and separates even believers into the many and the few. In the Koran, a text Emerson frequently refers to, we read:

The man whom God guides is rightly guided; but those whom He confounds will surely be the losers. We have predestined for Hell numerous jinn and men. They have hearts they cannot comprehend with; they have eyes they cannot see with; and they have ears they cannot hear with. They are like beasts—indeed, they are more misguided. Such are the heedless. . . . Among those whom We created there are some who give true guidance and act justly. As for those that deny Our revelations, We will lead them step by step to ruin, whence they cannot tell; for though I bear with them, My stratagem is sure. Has it never occurred to them that their compatriot [Mohammed] is no madman, but one who gives plain warning? . . . None can guide those whom God confounds. He leaves them blundering about in their sinful ways. (Sura 7:178-186)

Jesus, speaking to his disciples and the multitude gathered by the sea, taught the parable of the sower and the seed. “He that hath ears to hear,” Christ said, “let him hear.” Those who had not been trained in Jesus’ secrets did not fully understand his teaching.

However, Jesus, like a philosopher or hermeticist, initiates his disciples, teaching them the secret meanings of his speeches, which he conceals from outsiders, and he uses duplicitous locutions to speak to the many and to the few “as they were able to hear it. But without a parable spake he not unto them” (Mark 4:33-34). Jesus told his disciples that they shall know the kingdom of God, “but unto them that are without, all *these* things are done in parables: That seeing they may see and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and *their* sins should be forgiven them” (Mark 4:11-12).

Frank Kermode, in *The Genesis of Secrecy*, argues that Jesus’ parables were stories told to outsiders with the express purpose of concealing a mystery only to be understood by insiders.⁵ In order to “divine” the true or latent sense of the stories, one must be of the elect and be instructed in the art of divination. Outsiders, says Kermode, must content themselves with the manifest, and, as the passages quoted above from the Koran and from the Gospel of Mark bear out, they pay a supreme penalty for doing so: “the implication is that the exclusion arises not from the speaker’s intention, but from the stupidity of his hearers, so that the blame is theirs” (31).⁶ “Only those who already know the mysteries—what the stories really mean—can discover what the stories really mean,” Kermode tautologizes (3).

⁵ The Greek for “dark speeches” (probably *skotison*, to make obscure), Kermode says, means parables; to speak in parables is the opposite of speaking openly (25).

⁶ Despite this implication, it seems foolish to assume the speaker of parables does not intend to maintain the stupidity of his hearers, so they may never turn, know the truth, and be saved, for as Kermode points out, the stories are obscure on purpose to damn the outsiders. They are not impenetrable, but outsiders qua outsiders will misunderstand them anyway (32).

Ian MacLean makes a similar point about another tradition Emerson studied. In “The Interpretation of Natural Signs: Cardano’s *De subtilitate* versus Scalinger’s *Exercitationes*,” he argues that the characteristic rhetorical gesture in an occult text is to claim to open up a hidden universe or meaning to the uninitiated while protecting this hidden universe or meaning from the eyes of the vulgar by an elaborate system of expressive and argumentative ploys. These ploys test the supplicant: whoever understands will understand further and continue seeking. This double gesture, MacLean writes, guarantees the survival of the secrets by forever deferring the promise of full explanation and clarity. The initiate becomes fully initiated only through his own efforts in exegesis (235-36).

Leo Strauss writes in “On Plato’s Republic,” “One cannot understand Plato’s teaching as he meant it if one does not know what the Platonic dialogue is” (*City* 52). Coleridge, in his *Philosophical Lectures*, argues that though Plato’s dialogues contain the doctrines of Socrates, “they by no means convey the opinions of Plato” (156). Having learned both from Socrates’ martyrdom and from his own travels to study Pythagorean philosophy, Plato, Coleridge argues, learned the practice and the necessity of delivering two kinds of lectures “popular and scientific, or EXOTERIC and ESOTERIC” (159). “In a republic,” Coleridge writes, “where the mob were to be the judge, a man’s innocence was of little avail. It was simply as if we should say, the daily papers have expressed such and such a feeling for or against a man.” Thus, he continues, “philosophers felt themselves bound, in the strict sense, to be prudent and reserved.” Plato employed the esoteric method because, Coleridge argues,

He wished to diffuse as much knowledge, among all who were desirous of any, as they were capable of receiving, and then out of those to select such minds as had

manifested a peculiar susceptibility and therefore were worthy of being selected to undergo, as the criterion, a certain moral discipline rendering them capable of being those to whom Plato could say the truth without conveying falsehood. (159)

He deployed this method not out of a desire to “withhold any truth” but out of “a sense of high responsibility, not to do mischief and arm fools with fire under the pretence of conveying truth.” “He would not,” Coleridge alludes to Cicero’s and Montaigne’s essays on friendship, “set the temples of his native country on fire, simply to bring about—what? The destruction of something imperfect for that which was fiendish” (159).⁷ Thus, for Coleridge, Plato’s prudent method of maintaining two teachings was in and of itself a way of sustaining social order, for his esoteric teachings were only available to those few philosophical friends who understood the nature of states, citizens, and ruling while all the rest could be guided by the moral and practical exoteric teachings that teach submission before the Law.

While many have commented upon Plato’s two teachings, not all see them as serving political ends. As with many religious teachings, Plato’s two teachings reveal to

⁷ Cicero, in “Friendship,” writes that friends will ask nothing of one another—in times of war or peace—that violates honor or the interests of the state. Friendship can thus only occur in an exemplary fashion among those responsible for the maintenance of the state, but true friendship is rare among those jockeying for political advancement (xvii:64). True friendship can never be a threat to social order, for, being based in honor, no friend would ask his friend to conspire against the state. Cicero notes that evil deeds done in the name of friendship are still evil, as when Caius Blossius acted upon Tiberius Gracchus’ violent commands and would have done even more violence had he been asked: “What, even if he wised you to set fire to the capitol?” “He never would have thought of that,” he replied. “But what if he had?” “Then I would have complied” (xi:37). Montaigne, in “Of Friendship,” reads the testimony of Caius Blossius as revealing “the mystery” of friendship constituted by “perfect knowledge.” Caius Blossius knew Tiberius Gracchus would not have asked him to burn down the temple (not, in Montaigne, the capitol), but his willingness to do so proves “they were more friends than citizens, more friends to one another than either friends or enemies to their country, or than friends to ambition and innovation.” Montaigne asks his reader to “suppose all this guided by virtue, and all this by the conduct of reason” (1:28.192).

some Plato's beneficence, his establishing a path from lower to higher truths for all to walk. Leo Strauss, like Coleridge, however, explicitly connects Plato's method to his politics. Whereas Coleridge holds that Plato's esoteric and exoteric doctrines were different in time and place—that his Socratic dialogues, available to all, were his exoteric doctrines, and that his esoteric teachings were conveyed orally to private students—Strauss's insight is that Plato's method made his exoteric and esoteric teaching simultaneous—the exoteric Socratic dialogues conveyed esoteric teachings “between the lines.” To understand what the Platonic dialogue is, Strauss argues, one must understand its form. To understand Plato's teaching, “one must pay as much attention to the How as to the What.”⁸ Strauss notes, “One must postpone one's concern with the most serious questions (the philosophical questions) in order to become engrossed in the study of a merely literary question,” which is, if properly understood, “the question of the relation between society and philosophy” (*City* 52).⁹ For Strauss, to begin to understand Plato one ought to begin with the most obvious facts: Plato does not speak in his dialogues but seems to speak through Socrates who, as a master of irony, claims to assert nothing and thus have no teaching (*City* 50-1). Irony, a form of dissimulation Aristotle calls a vice (Strauss points out), in the Platonic dialogues is a dissimulation concerning wisdom, a humility before truth, and an admission that due to one's ignorance one cannot assert but only question. More to the point, for Strauss (whose Plato is always a bit Nietzschean) “irony is essentially related to the fact that there is a natural order of rank among men”;

⁸ In his *Journals*, Emerson writes, “In composition the *What* is of no importance compared to the *How*” (JMN 5:304-04)

⁹ Though Strauss might dismiss (perhaps with a smile) the comparison with Bacon, in *The New Organon* Bacon recommends that the seeker of truth postpone grasping for final things during the process of the quest. When studying the subtlety of nature, and God's encryptions therein, patience and humility are required.

therefore “irony consists in speaking differently to different kinds of people” (*City* 51). The “literary question” that precedes the philosophical question, what Strauss characterizes as “the question of presentation” or “communication,” and what for Coleridge is a matter of conveyance, could as easily be called a question of rhetoric, for all are concerned with questions of community and prudence.¹⁰

What the Platonic dialogue can overcome is, Strauss alleges, “the essential defect of writings” (*City* 52). As Socrates argues in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, writing is inferior to speech not because it produces forgetfulness and only seeming wisdom but because words, when written, speak both to those who understand and to those who do not. Writing is stupid, Socrates argues, and is incapable of distinguishing between who ought to be spoken to and who ought not be, so it says the same thing to everybody. Only one thing escapes this defect (in the words of Phaedrus): “the living and breathing word of him who knows” (276a). Only this kind of oral—secret, acroamatic, esoteric—teaching “knows to whom it should speak, and before whom to be silent” (276a). Plato, obviously, however, wrote, yet according to ancient and medieval philosophers, his dialogues contain more than one teaching. They know how to discern between their readers and how to say different things to different people.

According to Xenophon, Strauss argues, Socrates approached different audiences differently. Those of good natures who loved to think and dispute he led toward truth and those who merely listened he led toward agreement with salutary opinions (*City* 53). Thus, Strauss argues, Plato’s dialogues are arranged in such a way as to reveal the truth to some who “by nature” are fit for thinking while confirming, or at least not disturbing, the

¹⁰ Even Aristotle can give in on the necessity of dissembling from time to time. See Larry Arnhart’s reading of the *Rhetoric*, *Aristotle on Political Reasoning*.

common sense of others. A good reader will read carefully every aspect of good writing, “however small or seemingly insignificant.” Good writing, modeled on good conversation, picks out the readers to which it will unburden itself, but good writing need not be a dialogue. As Strauss shows in his writing about Maimonides and Machiavelli, writing in the form of a letter addressed a friend or student can also reveal itself to the ears of careful readers while excluding others or revealing only salutary truths to them (see his *Philosophy and Law* and *Thoughts on Machiavelli*).¹¹

Kermode notes that the rules and theories of the most serious philosophical or philological inquiry, hermeneutics (before modern philosophy appropriated it), were intimately linked to the exegesis of sacred texts.¹² The ecclesiastical institutions where hermeneutics was practiced controlled not only the texts that could be interpreted but also the limits of interpretation. Such institutions, however, Kermode notes, rarely ruled out

¹¹ Emerson writes in “Friendship,” “The scholar sits down to write, and all his years of meditation do not furnish him with one good thought or happy expression; but it is necessary to write a letter to a friend,—and forthwith troops of gentle thoughts invest themselves, on every hand, with chosen words” (W 2:184). This way of writing, as if to a friend, allows one to “talk better than we are wont” and creates the rhetorical opportunity for a “series of sincere, graceful, rich communications, drawn from the oldest, secretest experience” (W 2:184). Before the friend, Emerson writes, “I may be sincere. Before him I may think aloud. I am arrived at last in the presence of a man so real and equal that I may drop even those undermost garments of dissimulation, courtesy, and second thought which men never put off, and may deal with him with the simplicity and wholeness with which one chemical atom meets another” (W 2:193). “Sincerity,” he platonizes, “is the luxury allowed, like diadems and authority, only to the highest rank; *that* being permitted to speak truth, as having none above it to court or conform unto” (W 2:193-94).

¹² Hermeneutics, Kermode reminds us, takes the cunning, sometimes violent, god Hermes as its patron. Hermes is also “the patron of thieves, merchants, and travelers, of heralds and what heralds pronounce, their *kerygma*,” and “has to do with oracles, including the dubious sort known as *kledon*, which at the moment of its announcement may seem trivial or irrelevant, the secret sense declaring itself only after long delay, and in circumstances not originally foreseeable” (1). Hermes is also the god of going between: between the living and the dead and between the latent and the manifest (2).

bold speculations or inhibited work it had no choice but to condemn. This was so because for the most part practitioners were publicly committed to religious faith and law. This “doctrinal adhesion,” Kermode points out, is what distinguishes different practices of hermeneutics. Secular philosophers and interpreters without this profession of faith and doctrinal adhesion have rarely bothered to (or thought it necessary to) “undertake the ardors of the training held necessary for serious work” in the criticism of sacred texts (viii).

Insiders profess to have an immediate access to the mysteries and hidden senses of texts; therefore, for them, outsiders’ interpretations possess little insight or value. The outsider lives in a world whose organization seems obscure, and, says Kermode, quoting A. N. Whitehead, suffers from the delusion that the world is “patient of interpretation in terms of whatever happens to interest us” (xi). Insiders, belonging to an institution or professing a faith, have certain privileges and agree to certain constraints. “Perhaps the most important of these,” Kermode writes, “are the right to affirm, and the obligation to accept, the superiority of latent over manifest sense” (2). It is to accept that there exists a class of narratives that mean more than they manifestly say, and that what appears trivial, vacuous, or tedious to the outsider is not necessarily so. Kermode writes,

the initiate assumes that the absence of some usual satisfactions, the disappointment of conventional expectations, connotes the existence of other satisfactions, deeper and more difficult, inaccessible to those who see without perceiving and hear without understanding. (7)

Once free of the constraints of the manifest sense of texts and the apparently interminable *différance* of exoteric meanings, once we move from “carnal readings” to “spiritual senses,” says Kermode, we invite “esoteric dispute” (9).

Are Emerson's stratagems analogous to religious stratagems that leave some blundering about in their sinful ways, leading them to ruin, or preventing them from turning so their sins are forgiven? Is Emerson an insider whose doctrinal adhesion allows him greater access to mysteries or obliges him to present his teachings in parables?

Barbara Packer is not lost alone in Emerson's labyrinth. Richard Poirier, in *Poetry and Pragmatism*, attempts to find a way out by psychologizing:

Emerson makes himself sometimes amazingly hard to read, hard to get close to, all the more because he finds it manifestly difficult to get close to himself, to read or understand himself. If you want to get to know him, you must stay as close as possible to the movements of his language, moment by moment, for at every moment there is movement with no place to rest. (31)

Poirier writes, in *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*, that Emerson has a predilection for "abandonment," a tendency to move out of any rhetorical position he has just occupied into a different one "as if in hot pursuit of a truth." Emerson seems uncomfortable, Poirier notes, with "the propriety of sentences and paragraphs with their implicit commitment to ideas of duration, sequence, and logical procession" (74).

Julie Ellison, in *Emerson's Romantic Style*, looks around and declares Emerson's writing "at once discontinuous and repetitive" (75). She believes that for Emerson, words are fossils and their present use is always quotation (9). Emerson is for her, as he is for many, anti-authoritarian, and so she reads his career as developing along the axes of verbal power and contempt for criticism (9, 17). His repetition, she argues, is no accident but is the consciously elected form of the mature prose (160-61); however, since Emerson does not have a unified teaching, she believes, his discontinuities and variations have the cumulative effect of breaking one truth into many, subtly differentiated truths (167).

Lee Rust Brown, in *The Emerson Museum: Practical Romanticism and the Pursuit of the Whole*, takes to examining the stony steps of Emerson's labyrinth: "The famous contradictions between Emerson's statements also take place with his individual statements: through ambiguity, his sentences admit their rhetorical faults, the partial meanings they at first seem to pass off on us; but they also justify themselves by offhandedly publishing their several internal faults or divides of meaning" (187). David Marr, in *American Worlds Since Emerson*, thinks he has discovered Emerson's "intriguing strategy" where Emerson "introduce[s] two distinct but partly overlapping senses of his key term" but then "forewarn[s] the reader of inaccuracies to come about which he need not worry" (43).

Leonard Neufeldt provides a catalog worthy of Polonius in *The House of Emerson*, pointing out that in the Emerson Industry there are various Emersons depending upon whether "the approach has been comprehensive or partial, biographical-historical or thematic, originating in and passed through Emerson's forms or self-created, theoretical or non-theoretical and anti-theoretical, systematically analytical or evangelical and appreciative" (11). David Van Leer succumbs to the paradox of Emerson's seeming inconsistencies, in *Emerson's Epistemology: The Argument of the Essays*, writing that Emerson's "mind worked at different levels and intensities, with the result that not all his statements are equally well thought out" (16). Van Leer, however, treats the essays "as if they were both philosophical and organized." "In the absence of evidence one way or the other," he writes, "I simply assume that the essays can be read seriously in terms of their philosophical content, and by such philosophical readings show the individual works to be more carefully structured than many have assumed" (xiv). Van Leer, even if his

interpretation of Emerson as Kantian differs significantly from the one argued here, at least contends that Emerson “had intellectual reasons for saying all the things we have always found so curious and challenging” (18). John Michael, in *Emerson and Skepticism: The Cipher of the World*, writes that “the standard reading of Emerson” follows Whicher’s notion that Emerson progresses from “freedom to fate,” “from the limitless ambitions of his early work to his later acceptance of the fated limitations of human power” (x). Thus, he argues, “We admit that Emerson habitually contradicts himself, yet we tend only to listen to the affirmative half of what he says” (ix). He also asserts, “Emerson’s unsystematic borrowings and his permeability to philosophical influences should not prevent serious consideration of his engagement with ideas” (36).

Yvor Winters rarely misses an opportunity in any of his books or essays to dismiss Emerson as a dangerous barbarian whose brand of sentimental mysticism adversely affected American literature. Winters blames Emerson for Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost’s flaccid thinking in their poems, and he nearly blames Hart Crane’s life of excess and suicide on Emerson. T. S. Eliot, however, considered Emerson second-rate and hardly worth considering. H. L. Mencken, in his book *Friedrich Nietzsche*, writes,

Nietzsche had read Emerson in his youth, and those Emersonian seeds which have come to full flower in the United States as the so-called New Thought movement—with Christian Science, osteopathy, mental telepathy, pseudo-psychology, and that grand lodge of credulous *comiques*, the Society for Psychical Research, as its final blossoms—all of this made its mark on the philosopher of the superman, too. (51)

In a review of a French biography of Emerson, *The Enraptured Yankee* by Régis Michaud, called “The Moonstruck Pastor,” Mencken writes,

It is one of the mysteries of American life that Rotary has never discovered Emerson. His so-called philosophy, even more than that of Elbert Hubbard, seems to be made precisely for the lunch-table idealists. There is in it an almost incomparable sweep of soothing generalities, a vast marshaling of sugary and not too specific words, a wholesale assurance, a soaring optimism. It sets up a magnificent glow without generating any destructive heat. I can imagine nothing better suited to the spiritual needs of used-car dealers, trust company vice-presidents, bath-fixture magnates, and the like, gathered together in the sight of God to take cheer from one another and shove the Republic along its rocky road. (*Mencken Chrestomathy* 477)

While such arrogant dismissals certainly have their charm, the tendency to take Emerson less than seriously dangerously miscalculates his intentions.

Other critics have been more suspicious and less quick to make determinations.

Robert J. Loewenberg, in *An American Idol: Emerson and the "Jewish Idea,"* suspects Emerson's "exoteric or surface prose is a kind of bait" used "to seduce his reader" (34), and his notorious contempt for conventions merely "a device calculated to win applause from intellectuals who prize non-conformity on principle" (42). Stuart Gerry Brown's important 1945 essay "Emerson's Platonism," perhaps comes closest to capturing Emerson's methods; however, since Brown's understanding of Platonism is "traditional," Emerson's intentions elude him. Brown writes that Emerson disguised his Platonism beneath a faddish cloak of German Idealism and oriental mysticism (326). His audiences, happy to listen to "his proclamation of the ideal spirit and beauty" behind everyday appearances because they were embroiled in material problems, Brown argues, "would have lost interest soon enough if he had devoted his lectures the discussions of the metaphysical rationale which lay behind his conclusions, the systems of Plato, Plotinus, and Proclus" (326). Emerson's pseudo-Platonism was popular; but genuine Platonism, Brown writes,

is a rigorous intellectual discipline and requires sustained effort of imagination, [it] can never hope to attract many followers. . . . The Platonist who wished to influence his fellow men will do well, therefore, to emphasize his *conclusions*, because they are as attractive as any that men have ever reached, and to state them in as moving and persuasive language as possible. (327)

Emerson's essays, Brown writes, "consist chiefly of conclusions," but "He knew well enough what he was doing" (327).

David M. Robinson writes in *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer* that Emerson's "goal was a style which would engage the reader in such a way as to transform reading into a dialogue of two minds" (160). This is an especially important point, but Robinson backs away from it, for he considers the strategy of the *Essays* to be merely to divide and subdivide the topic under discussion, to move from a general truth to a moral stance, from doctrine to application, not to divide the audience. These attempts at moral persuasion, Robinson feels, mean Emerson's texts are best read as belonging to a sermon tradition (166). While this sermonic aspect is certainly "in" Emerson, it is perhaps merely an initiatory dissembling stratagem, for Emerson seems more interested in the possibilities of creating a dialogue between like minds than in preaching simple moral persuasion to inferior, passive minds. Robinson however correctly notes that since Emerson's "volumes of essays are rarely read in total, because the individual essays in them stand too readily on their own" (174), critics usually fail to discern the pattern of his contradictions and repetitions.

Some of the most interesting insights into Emerson's rhetorical stratagems, however, can be gained by looking at *Talks with Emerson*, a book of perhaps dubious reminiscences written by Emerson's admirer Charles J. Woodbury. Woodbury's "story of an enthusiasm" (165) describes how he stood in religious awe before Emerson. He

says of Emerson's "advent" (4): "His presence broke the shard of the will and concentrated the man. . . . With his coming, adolescence ended and virility began" (11). Woodbury remembers Emerson's "fine contagion" (8) and his "kindly craft" (17): "There was something 'catching' about him" (74), for he had "a nature so orgasmic" (75). Emerson, he says, "*belonged* to the young men" (12), his "brave young men," "nigh starving youth," "heroic boys" (13). The power of his soul "meant more to you than all his esoteric facts and ideas" (61). Emerson talked slowly, and "his words had the trick of impressing themselves which belongs to happy selection" (7).

Woodbury claims Emerson was "inapt to distinguish between his hearers" (10), and he asserts that Emerson "had nothing to withhold" (6), yet he remembers Emerson saying, "The most interesting writing is that which does not quite satisfy the reader. Try and leave a little thinking for him. . . . A little guessing does him no harm, so I would assist him with no connections" (22), and, "If you must be contradictory, let it be clean and sharp as the two blades of scissors meet" (24). Woodbury quotes Emerson's remarks: "Remember you must know only the excellent of all that has been presented. But often a chapter is enough. The glance reveals when the gaze obscures. Somewhere the author has hidden his message. Find it, and skip the paragraphs that do not talk to you" (27-28). Emerson also instructs, as Maimonides does in *The Guide for the Perplexed* about chapter headings, "learn how to tell from the beginnings of the chapters and from glimpses of the sentences whether you need to read them entirely through" (28).

Not only was Emerson teaching Woodbury how to read famed texts, he was also revealing his own methods of composition, telling Woodbury that much in Emerson's texts is meaningless talk meant to conceal his true teachings which flash up before the

careful reader. "These omissions and silences in Emerson's literature reward," Woodbury writes, "and it is well to master its cipher" (155). Of those who elected to grapple with Emerson, Woodbury recalls, "His opponents wove his sisal fibres into ropes, but when they were drawn tight he had escaped. All of him the attitude of hostility could detain was the linen cloth about the body" (144). Woodbury alludes to the enigma in Mark 14:51-52: upon Jesus' arrest, all his disciples fled; however, "there followed him a certain young man, having a linen cloth cast about his naked body; and the young men laid hold on him: and he left the linen cloth, and fled from them naked." Like this boy, Woodbury writes, Emerson was always already "out and away from the cry of the hounds" (157).

Hiding in the Light, or, Esotericism as Method

How delicious the belief that he could elude all guards, precautions, ceremonies, means, and delays, and hold instant and sempiternal communication.

—Emerson, "Success" (W 8:286)

If we are to understand Emerson's esotericism, we have to move beyond the complicated consensus concerning Emerson's contradictory style and the supposed impenetrability of his strategies, and explain how and why he uses rhetorical stratagems to simultaneously conceal and reveal his political philosophy. To do so, we must read Emerson as a writer with a commitment to the genre of multilevel, or esoteric, writing. It is, however, as difficult to prove a philosopher's commitment to this genre as it is to prove he has secrets. Many of the rhetorical and stylistic devices that have come to be associated as signals of the presence of esotericism—inconsistencies, contradictions, digressions, silence where a lengthy discussion would be expected, mixtures of imprecise

or provisional assumptions with commonplaces, and so on—could be deliberate or could be inadvertent, and the writer could really be simply a bad writer.

Alfarabi (ca. 870-950), known to medieval philosophers as “the second teacher” (Aristotle was “the first teacher”), is a useful figure to guide our descent into Emerson’s esotericism. For Leo Strauss, Alfarabi is a key figure for understanding ancient political philosophy, the role of the philosopher in society, and the applications of political philosophy in a post-(or perhaps anti-)Enlightenment world. As Miriam Galston explains, Alfarabi, as a Muslim, was bound to the strictures of the Koran against philosophizing, but as a philosopher he was driven to discover means to avoid persecution from those whose opinions, beliefs, and religious ways of life were threatened by the heterodox views of philosophy. Philosophers can only practice safely in the open if the population is rational and is committed to a life of inquiry. That is, philosophers are only truly safe in the best regime. As long as illusion and irrationality prevail, philosophers must keep their truths secret. Emerson seems to confirm this in a late lecture, “Natural Religion,” when he says, “It were unwise, perhaps mischievous, to shake the settled faith of another until a new shall appear to take the place of the old” (*Uncollected* 56). He also remarks, in his notebooks, “Society does not love its unmaskers” (TN 1:234).

In *Plato’s Laws*, Alfarabi illustrates Plato’s manner of teaching and writing using an anecdote about a pious ascetic, who, seeking to escape the city after its tyrannical sovereign commanded he be arrested, disguised himself as a vagabond street musician

and approached the city's gates.¹³ When the gatekeeper asked him who he was, he replied that he was the pious ascetic everyone was looking to arrest. In this way, Alfarabi notes, the pious ascetic was able to save himself without lying in speech (84). This story shows Leo Strauss "that one can tell a very dangerous truth provided one tells it in the proper surroundings, for the public will interpret the absolutely unexpected speech in terms of the customary and expected meaning of the surroundings rather than it will interpret the surroundings in terms of the dangerous character of the speech" (WPP 136).

Alfarabi claims Plato used ruses, for he did not feel free to reveal everything to everyone. Therefore, Plato "followed the practice of using symbols, riddles, obscurity, and difficulty, so that science would not fall into the hands of those who do not deserve it and be deformed, or into the hands of one who does not know its worth or who uses it improperly" ("Plato's" 85). This gave Plato an additional stratagem: once his practice of deception became well known, he could, sometimes, turn to subjects treating the highest themes and discuss them openly and literally, but those out of the know would consider these unconcealed statements symbolic and think he must have intended something different. This *techné* is one of the secrets of Plato's books, says Alfarabi, and "no one is able to understand that which he states openly and that which he states symbolically unless he is trained in the art itself, and no one is able to distinguish between the two unless he is skilled in the science being discussed" (85). Plato, says Alfarabi, is right to do this, and "God accommodates to what is right."

For Alfarabi, training in philosophy is a way of habituating minds for the rigors of inquiry, dialectical thinking, and the doubts such thinking creates. Galston writes of

¹³ For an excellent study of this work, see Joshua Parens, *Metaphysics as Rhetoric: Alfarabi's Summary of Plato's "Laws."*

Alfarabi's method, "To acquire the art of dialectic, one must engage in dialectical question and answer. Only by continued practice can a person acquire the mental agility philosophical investigation requires. One must practice by staging debates, even with partners who prize victory over learning" (42). As Galston points out, for Alfarabi, books can provide the requisite training in these dialectical arts and sciences if one is isolated from like minds in one's community or one's time. In books, the esotericist can transform reading into a dialogue of like minds. For Emerson too, books and good conversation are the places to turn for training in the science of philosophical thinking. Perhaps alluding to the opening of Plato's *Laws*, Emerson writes in "Inspiration" that dialectic, or conversation, is more an intoxicant than philosophical treatises: "Not Aristotle, not Kant or Hegel, but conversation, is the right metaphysical professor" (W 8:276). Emerson alfarabizes about the dialectic reading and conversation can provoke:

A wise man goes to this game to play upon others and to be played upon, and at least as curious to know what can be drawn from himself as what can be drawn from them. For, in discourse with a friend, our thought, hitherto wrapped in our consciousness, detaches itself, and allows itself to be seen as a thought, in a manner as new and entertaining to us as to our companions. For provocation of thought, we use ourselves and use each other. (W 8:276-77)

Some thoughts come to single souls, Emerson almost says, but others take two to find.

The continual presence of a real or potential threat of persecution, says Strauss, cannot prevent independent thinking or even public expression of a heterodox truth, "for a man of independent thought can utter his views in public and remain unharmed, provided he moves with circumspection. He can even utter them in print without incurring any danger, provided he is capable of writing between the lines" (PAW 23, 24). The persecution of philosophers, says Strauss, gave rise to a peculiar technique of writing

and a peculiar genre of literature, “in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines,” a literature

addressed, not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only. It has all the advantages of private communication without having its greatest disadvantage—that it reaches only the writer’s acquaintances. It has all the advantages of public communication without having its greatest disadvantage—capital punishment for the author. (PAW 25)

That Emerson is a master practitioner of this genre is the task this work seeks to prove.

In “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” Leo Strauss writes, “Every decent modern reader is bound to be shocked by the mere suggestion that a great man might have deliberately deceived the large majority of his readers” (PAW 35). Ancient and medieval philosophers, however, who were not bound by modern or Christian prejudices to be shocked that great thinkers practiced the craft of lying nobly, assumed *all* philosophical writings were exoteric and contained esoteric teachings between the lines. Their interpretations of these exo-esoteric writings, perhaps, were also written on multiple levels. It was commonly accepted, for example, that Plato and Aristotle had “unwritten doctrines” (αγραφα δογματα: *agrapha dógmata*), for in his second Epistle, Plato claims to have never written down his true teachings. To the ruler Dionysius, he writes, “There is no writing of Plato’s, nor will there ever be; those that are now called so come from an idealized and youthful Socrates” (314c). Similarly, Plutarch reports the famous exchange of letters between Alexander and Aristotle. Alexander complains about Aristotle’s publishing his oral doctrine, making it available to all. Aristotle replies that his doctrines are “both published and not published” since they “are written in style which makes them useless for ordinary teaching, and instructive only, in the way of memoranda, for those who have been already conversant in that sort of learning” (*Lives* 805-06).

Eleusinian, Hermetic, and Orphic mystery traditions distinguished materially—in time and place—between the exoteric and the esoteric teachings. The esoteric teachings were *acroamatic*, privately and orally communicated to chosen disciples (or *epopts*; thus the teachings were also known as *epoptic* teachings¹⁴). Aristotle, as Jesus seems also to have done, is said to have given private lectures to intimates and friends, making them conversant with his published teachings so that they might be able to read between his lines. Plato reports in his seventh Epistle that he had to test the tyrant Dionysius in order to determine if “Dionysius was really on fire with philosophy” (340b). There is a certain dignified and appropriate way to test tyrants “whose heads are full of half-understood doctrines,” he says. The extent of the philosophical undertaking, its mode of inquiry, its many difficulties and demands of discipline and labor are first presented. A true lover of wisdom with divine qualities will hear this and think “he has heard of a marvelous quest that he must at once enter upon with all earnestness, or life is not worth living” (340c). Such a student will seek wisdom with his teacher until he is able to proceed without a guide. Those with only “a coating of opinions, like men whose bodies are tanned by the sun,” quickly conclude that the amount of learning and labor required is too great and the changes in their lives too difficult. Plato says he used this method with Dionysius, who in his arrogance wrote down the exoteric teachings of Plato, those preliminary oral teachings and tests meant to measure the merit of the student, and claimed them as his own. Plato repeats that he has never written down his teachings, “for this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued

¹⁴ An *epopt* is a “beholder,” a person fully initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries. *Epopts* are seers, the initiated, able to “honor the smoke of many writings,” to see rightly every thing.

intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul" (341c). The examination is of no benefit to any but the few who need only little guidance to discover the truth by themselves (341e).

"No sensible man will venture to express his deepest thoughts in words, especially in a form which is unchangeable, as is true of written outlines," says Plato (343a). Anyone who studies high matters seriously, he continues, will be the last to write about them or expose his thought to the envy and criticism of others (344c). "If the author is really serious," says Plato, his "book does not contain his best thoughts." However, despite Plato's warnings against writing in his letters and in his exoteric (or Socratic) dialogues, such as *Phaedrus*, Plato wrote, and if his best thoughts are not contained in his published texts in an unchangeable way available for all to read, they might be smuggled in between the lines, for Plato is "concerned about the future" (311c) and the philosophers to come.

Plato affirms in his second Epistle the need to use *enigma* or *noema*. Concerned always that his writings might fall into the wrong hands, Plato could ensure, by writing obscurely, that "whoever reads them may not understand our meaning" (312d). Nothing could sound more "ridiculous" to the uninstructed than Plato's thoughts, he writes, but to the initiated who have discussed them and heard them for many years, yet who still might have the utmost difficulty separating and refining their gold, they are precious. The best precaution against philosophy falling into the wrong hands, writes Plato, is to write nothing down, "for it is impossible that things written down should not become known to

others" (314c). It does seem possible, though, to care for the future and to examine, at a distance, prospective students by writing esoterically in exoteric texts.

Most readers often never suspect that great writers of the past presented their views on crucial questions exclusively between the lines, Strauss argues, because of a positivist and historicist hermeneutic based on explicit statements that dismisses reading between the lines as arbitrary guesswork. According to Strauss's hermeneutic, however, there is a useful sign to determine if a writer practices this art: if, in reading an able writer who has a clear mind and a perfect knowledge of orthodox views and their ramifications, one notices surreptitious contradictions that occur, as it were, in passing, of certain necessary presuppositions or consequences which he explicitly recognizes and maintains elsewhere, one can reasonably suspect his opposition to that orthodox view and begin to study his writings again with less naïveté. Strauss writes, "If a master of the art of writing commits such blunders as would shame an intelligent high school boy, it is reasonable to assume that they are intentional, especially if the author discusses, however incidentally, the possibility of intentional blunders in writing" (PAW 30).¹⁵ But, Strauss asks, "how can a man perform the miracle of speaking in a publication to a minority, while being silent to the majority of his readers?" (PAW 25). This is possible, he asserts, because "thoughtless men are careless readers, and only thoughtful men are careful readers"; therefore, it is possible to write in a way that only a careful reader can detect

¹⁵ In *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Strauss discusses Machiavelli's stratagems in the *Discourses* where Machiavelli writes that a leader of an army must never believe a prudent and strong enemy's error but must suspect it is intentional and that there is fraud beneath it. To discover the intention beneath Machiavelli's or any writer's blunders, Strauss claims, is difficult but not impossible. It is only prudent that one attempt to understand what such manifest blunders as misquotations, misstatements, hasty generalizations, indefensible omissions, and other techniques conceal and signify (36).

one's meaning. However, Strauss asks, are there not clever men who are untrustworthy, who find the author out and denounce him to the authorities? Quoting a Socratic dictum, he states that since virtue is knowledge, thoughtful men (having tasted the forbidden fruit) are trustworthy, not cruel. Besides, he writes, a careful writer of normal intelligence is more intelligent than the most intelligent censor, and the burden of proof that the author holds heterodox views or that apparent literary deficiencies are not due to chance always falls on the censor (26).

Since writings are accessible to all who can read, all texts are, *sensu stricto*, exoteric, and a philosopher, who hates "the lie of the soul," would never deceive himself, Strauss argues, that his publicly expressed opinions were anything more than "likely tales," "noble lies," or "probable opinions." He leaves it to his careful readers "to disentangle the truth from its poetic or dialectic presentation," but it would defeat his purpose to indicate clearly which of his statements are noble lies. He might do no more than indicate that he does not object to telling lies which are noble or that lying nobly might be a philosopher's way of "considering his social responsibilities" (PAW 35-36).

In "How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*," Leo Strauss writes of the political philosopher's social responsibilities:

If it is of the essence of the wise man that he is able to live under every form of government, i.e., even in societies in which freedom of speech is strictly denied, it is of his essence that he is able to live without ever expressing those of his thoughts whose expression happens to be forbidden. The philosopher who knows the truth must be prepared to refrain from expressing it, not so much for reasons of convenience as for reasons of duty. (PAW 180)

Spinoza, however, was not a wise man. The criticisms that Strauss makes of Spinoza holds true as an esotericist's critique of all modern political philosophy that unwisely ridicules faith as superstition and aims to refute the claims of revelation instead of

reconciling faith and reason. Modern, secular, scientific, historicist, relativist, utilitarian political philosophy, according to this esotericist critique, looks with contempt at the thought of the past, at the ancients, and at old books; it privileges the new over the old. This kind of political philosophy aims too low; it makes vulgar judgments about “the good” according to what is most useful to the many, not what is noble or valuable in itself. Those esotericists who take their heading from the ancients believe that what is older is better, and what is oldest is best.

Strauss writes, “A man learns to write well by reading well good books, by reading most carefully books which are most carefully written” (PAW 144). Modern political philosophers are, for Strauss, bad writers because they are bad readers. They read old books according to the prejudices of a modern hermeneutic and assume they understand ancient writers better than those writers understood themselves. Those who do not share this modern prejudice, and who read old books slowly and carefully, begin with a different assumption: “today *the* truth may be accessible only through certain old books” (PAW 154). Modern political philosophers present an obstacle to genuine philosophy, for, Strauss contends, these writers were so frightened of the ascent to the light of the sun that they desired to make the ascent impossible to their descendents. They dug a deep pit beneath the cave and withdrew there. Should their descendents desire to ascend—to return to the philosophy of the ancients—they first have to reach the natural cave; then they have to reinvent tools, which would have been unnecessary to those who had dwelt in the natural cave (PAW 155). “Once this state has been reached,” Strauss says, “the original meaning of philosophy is accessible only through recollection of what philosophy meant in the past, i.e., for all practical purposes, only through the

reading of old books" (PAW 157). Those Enlighteners and modern philosophers who claimed to have refuted the central philosophical claims and theological teachings of the past and to have liberated philosophy from its subservient position as handmaiden to theology, however, also had recourse to a certain esotericism.

Enlightenment writers learned the art of *Ideenschmuggel* (idea smuggling) when the Church and the State instituted censorship to ward off the reformist movements of radicals, democrats, and a burgeoning bourgeoisie. Karl Marx encountered this dilemma as a young journalist. In "Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction" (1842), he writes of how changes in the censorship laws that supposedly allowed for public dissent and criticism in fact did not. For Marx, a *rational* State has no need of a censor. As Catherine Zuckert points out, the philosophers of the Enlightenment "tried to show that, rather than threatening fundamental democratic beliefs and institutions, the pursuit of knowledge and its popular dissemination provided the only firm basis for free government" (7).

In Marx's early texts, it is the *idea* of censorship and State coercion that he fights. He and his fellow journalists in the Young Germany movement had been censured for attacking Christianity, society, and morals in the public press. Some had been imprisoned; some exiled. The antagonism between the State and the Enlightenment resulted from both feeling they had the best interests of the citizenry at heart. For Marx, the aim of state censorship was to regulate "not only the behavior of individual citizens, but even the behavior of the public mind" (1:110). While the censorship law claimed to allow "the serious and modest investigation of truth," Marx concludes it is not the content

of the investigation that is inhibited but something that “lies outside,” “an unknown third thing” (1:111).

If seriousness and modesty are the concepts by which writing, especially political writing, is judged by a censor, then writers are always subject to the sensibility of the censor, and if these are governmentally-decreed categories, then not only truth but its investigation are things decreed. Marx writes that any investigation is necessarily immodest, for it implies that “the truth” is not yet settled. “If modesty is the characteristic feature of the investigation,” Marx writes, “then it is a sign that truth is feared rather than falsehood. It is a means of discouragement at every step forward I take. *It is the imposition on the investigation of a fear of reaching a result*, a means of guarding against the truth” (1:112). The State not only proscribes the range of a thinker’s thought but also the thinker’s style. “The law permits me to write,” Marx complains, “only I must write in a style that is not *mine*! I may show my spiritual countenance, but I must first set it in the *prescribed folds*!” Marx writes, “Truth includes not only the result but also the path to it” (1:113).

While some considered the presence of the censor a positive influence, for it forced the writer to take greater care in his thinking and writing,¹⁶ Marx is more concerned with the contradictions between the spirit and the letter of the law than in writing (or reading) more carefully. Quoting Spinoza he writes, “*Verum index sui et falsi*” (Truth is the touchstone of itself and falsehood), and “The existence of light

¹⁶ Marx, like other modern philosophers, used what Bagley calls “conditional esotericism.” His goal was to promote public discussion of scientific, political, and philosophical matters. He wrote “in code” under conditions of persecution, but his goal was to make exoteric discussions of important matters acceptable. The audience for his writings was the many, not the few, thus the “depth level” of his writings is relatively shallow.

suffices to expel darkness" (1:112, 126). As Margaret Rose points out, however, Marx and his fellow Enlighteners were quickly learning that power is political, not cultural (25). Political power would not permit the unification of society from below through the popular press. Writers (with a certain doctrinal adhesion) were allowed to attack the Church and State in a serious and modest way, but, Marx contends, an attack is necessarily hostile. Revolutionary writers could attempt to use indirection and write allegorically of ancient themes or foreign cities, but the law also forbade presenting in a favorable light parties elsewhere that work for the overthrow of the state system (1:115). Radicals could try their hand at ironic and parodic texts with underground and secret languages to escape the censor, but there was always the danger that the intended audience would not "get the joke." Or, since the censors only looked at short, popular texts, they could write long and tedious dissertations that concealed the forbidden truths inside scholarly disputations, but this ran a different risk—that no one would read them. As Marx wrote in a letter to Feuerbach, it is impossible to attack certain subjects "except in books over 21 sheets, but books of over 21 sheets are not books read by the people" (3:350).

Even if modern progressive political philosophers practiced a kind of esotericism to avoid state censors, as Marx did, their aim, for Strauss, bears no resemblance to the intentions of those who practice the ancient art of esotericism:

There is all the difference in the world between an author who considers himself merely a link in the chain of a venerable tradition, and for this very reason uses allusive and elliptical language, i.e., language that is intelligible only on the basis of the tradition in question, and an author who denies all value to tradition and therefore uses various stylistic means, especially allusive and elliptical language, in order to eradicate the traditional views from the minds of his best readers. (PAW 188)

Political philosophers who consider themselves links in the chain of a venerable tradition consider it their duty to help prepare for a better regime while helping to maintain social order even in a bad regime by writing in such a way that only the few gain access to the truth. Part of the duty of maintaining social order in this esotericist tradition of wise men, to which I am arguing Emerson belongs, is for philosophers to assume (at least publicly or exoterically) that the fundamental laws and customs of a people come from the gods or from God. Accepting this, and loyally and piously submitting to the law, the philosopher is free to philosophize within the boundaries of the law. For such philosophers, the only freedom is in bondage.¹⁷

The Enlightenment premises of Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, and the French Revolution undermine and trivialize tradition, custom, faith, and the foundations of revealed law in favor of making man the measure and the study of man. The “necessary beginning, the constant companion, and the unerring sign of that search for truth which is possible in our time,” writes Strauss, is the critique of the present, or the critique of modern sophistry also known as modern rationalism (which is “only a semblance of rationalism” [*Philosophy and Law* 22], of which irrationalism is a variety [135, note. 1]). In a statement programmatic for all anti-historicist Straussians, he writes, “so long as we do not purposely struggle against our own prejudices through historical reflection—we find ourselves fully in the power of the mode of thought produced by the Enlightenment and consolidated by its proponents or opponents” (*Philosophy and Law* 24).

In “The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*” Strauss takes Maimonides as an exemplary esotericist. Maimonides’ thinking is not legalistic (what we

¹⁷ See Strauss’s *Philosophy and Law* for more on this topic.

ought to do), but treats the true science of law (what we ought to think and believe) (PAW 39). His teaching begins with the legal prohibition against explaining the secrets of the Torah. Maimonides accepts this as legally binding and evidently wise.¹⁸ While oral or acroamatic teaching is preferable, writing in the form of a confidential lecture or a private letter addressed to a friend or pupil provides a method close to private conversation, dialogue, or instruction. Maimonides does not transgress the law of teaching secrets to more than one man while taking account of the necessity of writing: "Only the necessity of saving the law can have caused him to break the law" (PAW 49). Writing as he did steered a middle course between impossible obedience and flagrant transgression. His style allowed him to give a written explanation of Biblical secrets, yet meet conditions required for oral explanation: "He had to become a master of the art of revealing by not revealing and of not revealing by revealing" (PAW 52).

How does one know that one's reader will be a pupil worthy of examination? How can one assure that one is read only by worthy pupils? Will the letter arrive at its intended destination? Strauss purports that Maimonides learned how write in such a way that he could not only examine students not yet born—a kind of *actio in distans*—but also prevent incompetent readers from understanding his book. In oral teachings, Strauss

¹⁸ Modern presumptions and the traditions of Christian scholasticism have led, Strauss writes, to a forgetting that in the philosophizing of Jews and Muslims, there is no clear demarcation between revelation and the law—neither was a faith, creed, or set of dogmas, but an all-comprehensive view of a regulatory, normative social order. Revelation lent itself to interpretation by loyal philosophers as the perfect law. It was the perfect political order for these *falasifa* who attempted to arrive at a perfect understanding, according to secondary causes and natural phenomenon, of the supreme perfection of man, and it compelled them to justify the pursuit of philosophy before tribunal of the Divine Law (PAW 10). For them, the highest Law was not a set of commandments, like Christian law, but a law of reason; therefore, the principles of moral law were "probable" or "generally accepted" *nomoi*, but were not obligatory for philosophers as philosophers (PAW 11).

argues, a superior man can proceed to impart a truth not fit for everybody's use to another who may or may not be able to become reconciled to it by giving hints and by casting some doubt on some remote or insignificant consequences of a premise of accepted opinion. If the hint is understood, a teacher can explain things more fully, gradually leading the student nearer to the truth. If the student fails to comprehend the secret, then the teacher stops, but he does not stop talking. Instead, he gives the hint a more conventional meaning, gradually leading the poor student back to the "safe region of accepted views" (PAW 53). This Maimonides learned to do in writing by interrupting short hints by long stretches of silence and insignificant talk, by imbedding hints in apparently conventional sentences (PAW 53-4), and by not stating the links between scattered chapter headings and the chapters themselves, writing instead "with invisible ink in the empty spaces between the sentences" (PAW 62). "The purpose of repeating conventional statements," Strauss writes, "is to hide the disclosure, in repetition, of unconventional views." What matters is not the conventional view but the slight additions or omissions that "transmit 'chapter headings' of the secret and true teaching" (PAW 64). Maimonides' intention in writing the *Guide*, Strauss tells us, was "that the truths should flash up and then disappear again" (PAW 66). His intention was not only to reveal the truth but also to re-veil it, as the Freemasons say. Maimonides, then, teaches the truth not merely by inventing parables but by using conscious and intentional contradictions, hidden from the vulgar, between statements neither parabolic nor enigmatic (PAW 68-9).

We should assume, then, that in an esoteric text such contradictions are not the author's "unconscious" or his cultural ideology making a clandestine intertextual

appearance in spite of the author's intentions. An esoteric writer is conscious of his contradictions, and he knows ways of hiding or highlighting them. One way is to discuss the same subject in a contradictory manner on pages far apart. One might also make one of the two contradictory statements in passing. Or one can contradict the first statement not directly but by contradicting its implications (if $a = b$ and $b = c$, then $a = c$, but if $a \neq c$ then $a \neq b$). Another method is to contradict the first by seeming to repeat it while actually adding to it or omitting from it an apparently negligible expression (PAW 70-1). Esotericists also make felicitous use of ambiguous words which offer one face toward vulgar and another face toward those who understand by themselves. Often a common word placed unobtrusively within an unobtrusive sentence can be "filled with high explosive which can destroy all beliefs" (PAW 72). The discovery of contradiction, incomplete quotations, or other signs of esotericism compel the attentive, potential philosopher to take pains to find out the actual teaching (PAW 74). Strauss describes the esoteric *überautobahn* thusly:

There are books the sentences of which resemble highways, or even motor roads. But there are also books the sentences of which resemble rather winding paths which lead along precipices concealed by thickets and sometimes even along well-hidden and spacious caves. These depths and caves are not noticed by the busy workmen hurrying to their fields, but they gradually become known and familiar to the leisured and attentive wayfarer. For is not every sentence rich in potential recesses? (PAW 78)

Strauss writes, "Cannot miracles be wrought by such little words as 'almost,' 'perhaps,' 'seemingly'?" (Or by Nietzsche's dangerous "maybe?") The esotericist can also hide the conditional nature of a thought by turning it into a long sentence or inserting it into a parenthesis of some length (PAW 78).

Modern interpreters of Platonist political philosophers tend to misrecognize what is at stake in such writings or feel they can safely dismiss or ignore them because they are “out of date,” or because philosophy is “dead” or “completed.” Strauss bids us to remember the difference between the exoteric and the esoteric, noting that it would be rash to identify the true teaching of the philosophers with what they taught most frequently or conspicuously. Whether or not Strauss’s paranoia concerning the persecution of philosophers was ever justified, he clung to the notion that philosophy and philosophers were always “in grave danger” because no society ever recognizes philosophy or the right to philosophize (PAW 17). He writes,

The exoteric teaching was needed for protecting philosophy. It was the armor in which philosophy had to appear. It was needed for political reasons. It was the form in which philosophy became visible to the political community. It was the political aspect of philosophy. It was “political philosophy.” (PAW 18)

“But,” Strauss writes, “the success of Plato (in averting the grave danger) must not blind us to the existence of danger which, however much its forms may vary, is coeval with philosophy” (PAW 21).

For philosophers of this tradition, the actualization of the just city is not required. It is enough for philosophers to follow the way of Socrates’ investigations of justice and the virtues—as long as they avail themselves of the art of Plato. Socrates could have chosen a life of security, conforming to false opinions of his fellow citizens, but he chose non-conformity and death. Plato found a solution: founding the virtuous city in speech. Only there can (certain) men reach perfection. The way of Socrates is modified and corrected, “for the intransigent way of Socrates is appropriate only for the philosopher’s dealing with the elite, whereas the way of Thrasymachus, which is both more and less exacting than the former, is appropriate for his dealings with the vulgar” (PAW 16).

Plato, avoiding conflict with the vulgar, avoids the fate of Socrates, and thus “the revolutionary quest for the other city ceased to be necessary” (PAW 16). Plato substitutes a more conservative way of action: “the gradual replacement of the accepted opinions by the truth or an approximation to the truth” accompanied by “provisional acceptance of the accepted opinions” (PAW 17). Instead of a philosopher-king who rules openly in virtuous city, there exists the possibility of “the secret kingship of the philosopher” who lives “privately as a member of an imperfect society which he tries to humanize within the limits of the possible” (PAW 17).

Emersonian Democracy?

Shall we then judge a country by the majority, or by the minority? By the minority, surely.

—Emerson, “Considerations by the Way” (W 6:236)

Leave this hypocritical prating about the masses. Masses are rude, lame, unmade, pernicious in their demands and influence, and need not be flattered but to be schooled. I wish not to concede anything to them, but to tame, drill, divide and break them up, and draw individuals out of them.

—Emerson, “Considerations by the Way” (W 6:237)

The ends I have hinted at made the scholar or spiritual man indispensable to the Republic or Commonwealth of Man.

—Emerson, “The Scholar” (W 10:262).

The confusion and indecision surrounding Emerson’s rhetoric also surrounds his political or philosophical tendencies. As Anders Hallengren points out, scholars and critics have described Emerson as a racist and an abolitionist, a sexist and a proto-feminist, an apologist for capital and a socialist radical, a conservative Whig, a Federalist, a Democrat, a Republican, a Free-Soiler, a social democrat, a proto-Marxist, an anarchist, an opponent of democratic majorities, and America’s philosopher of democracy, an American prophet, a European imitator, a Hindu, a Buddhist, a pragmatist, a Puritan, a

nihilist, an orthodox Christian, a pantheist, a godless infidel, an atheist, a God-intoxicated man, a Dionysian, a Hegelian, a German Idealist, a Neoplatonist, a Wordsworthian Romantic, a precursor to Nietzsche, Hitler, and fascism, a pacifist, and so on. Emerson is nothing if not protean. Christopher Newfield marks this confusion, writing, “Emerson’s readers not only notice the contradictions in his work but celebrate them as forms of higher consciousness, boldness, or complexity” (45). The problem a critic of Emerson faces, Michael Lopez thinks, lies “in attempting to understand systematically a mind extravagantly open to all experience, an intellect rigorous and aggressive enough in its determination to confront reality directly and to make use of it for its own increased power” (*Emerson* 53).

Despite his ability to be all things to all people, Emerson is not the man most think he is. Stanley Cavell, commenting on George Kateb’s study of Emerson, writes, “Emerson is a figure of democratic inspiration and aspiration” (951). Cornel West counts Emerson as an important democratic thinker. Anita Patterson, in *From Emerson to King*, notes that despite Emerson’s frequent use of racist language, he was an important influence on W. E. B. DuBois and Martin Luther King, Jr. However, the fact that certain well-intentioned liberals find Emerson useful does not mean his thinking is democratic.¹⁹ Perhaps it only proves that Emerson has successfully infected his liberal readers with his esoteric teachings beneath their level of consciousness by means of his exoteric teachings.

Christopher Newfield, in *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America*, stands apart from most who read Emerson from the Left, for he claims

¹⁹ For other readings of Emerson’s democratic thought, see Daniel S. Malchuk, Perry Miller, and Judith Shklar.

Emerson's ideas have the effect of weakening democracy. Strangely, however, this book about the "Emerson Effect" does little to ascribe this effect to Emerson's intention.

While Newfield could use a Spinozist language that describes how Emerson's texts get or attempt to get readers to will their own slavery, or the terminology of J. L. Austin to describe the illocutionary intentions behind Emerson's locutions and their perlocutionary effects, he does not. Instead, "Emerson" is merely a part of, or perhaps a symptom of, an "American" ideology that teaches citizens to forgo their freedom before the law made by their representatives and to consider this "corporate individualism" a source of a higher freedom.

Newfield's larger agenda is admirable, for he seeks to expose what is hidden in American "democratic" and "liberal" ideology, but we need no Emerson come from the grave to teach us that American "democracy" is a sham. Emerson is, for Newfield, less important than Newfield's own pseudo-Marxist attempt to describe how "the middle class" experiences "freedom" when really it possesses no sovereignty. Emerson's teachings on "individualism" and "self-reliance" are important documents in this political process, but Newfield reads them more as symptoms than causes, or at least he does little to suggest that Emerson had a philosophical or political agenda to create submissive individuals. What is missing in Newfield's book is the sense that though these ideological teachings are "in" Emerson, they come from somewhere or from someone. For Newfield, they seem inevitable secretions of a capitalist ideology, not intentional acts of an agent. Newfield never imagines that Emerson wrote esoterically, that his exoteric teaching encouraged the many to submit to the legislation of their betters or representatives while his esoteric teaching taught that few about their right to rule.

Sacvan Bercovitch, in *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America*, in arguing about the distinctions between “individualism” and “individuality” and whether or not Emerson drew upon the socialist connotations of these words or rebelled against them, does not, like Newfield, argue that “Emersonian individualism is a form of liberal co-optation,” but that it is instead “a form of utopian consciousness developed within the premises of liberal culture” (345). Bercovitch recognizes that Emerson’s politics are difficult to pin down, so he does not try. Instead, he catalogues the critiques of “individualism” by socialists (such as Leroux and Saint-Simon), for whom the term meant anarchy, exploitation, rootlessness, fragmentation, competition, and de Tocqueville,²⁰ for whom it destroys virtue (309). Though he claims Emerson understands “individualism” according to the socialist definition, Bercovitch at the same time claims Emerson completely repudiates socialism and that he “engaged in a pointed, persistent, and eventually vehement polemic against socialism” (310-11, 326). However, he also writes that “Emerson’s commitment to individuality” (which, unlike “individualism,” “served as a utopian rallying point against liberal ideology for virtually all groups in the political spectrum” [315]), “led him to embrace the socialists’ visionary ends” even if he did not like their methods and was even more deeply committed to liberal thought and the laissez faire concepts of Adam Smith (318-19, 330). In his dancing around, Bercovitch finds Emerson approaching “the edge of class analysis,” but he cannot explain this except to appeal to some always already preconceived notion of Emerson’s politics: “we know that Emerson never really gave serious thought to social

²⁰ Bercovitch calls Tocqueville a “moderate,” but David Marr writes, “Emerson’s well-known contempt for the leveling tendencies of democracy” is Tocquevillean (61).

reorganization" (324-25). He seems to think he can get away with this by referring to Emerson's notorious "ambiguity."

Emerson gave plenty of thought to social reorganization, but this reorganization hearkens back to Plato, not to Jacksonian politics, liberalism, or socialism. Emerson's reactions to the methods of liberals and socialists, however, are not "reactionary" in a simple or ordinary sense. Though I find Bercovitch's logic slippery, he does seem on the money (though I am not sure he realizes it) when he argues that Emersonian dissent against the Jacksonian ideology of individualism as "the last order" and the "highest reach of civilization" designed to perfect society and correct abuses relates to Francis Fukuyama's (Nietzschean/Straussian) argument about "the end of history." Bercovitch does not take this very far because he does not seem to understand that Fukuyama's (esoteric) argument in *The End of History and the Last Man* that American liberal democracy has brought about the end of history is announced with a painful wince and not a joyful shout.²¹ Though he does not build on this, he is correct that Emerson's politics is founded on a fear of the end of history in which vulgar social and economic democracy triumphs to bring about the age of the last man—an age without virtue, excellence, or spirit when humanity is reduced to striving for merely material ends.

Unlike Newfield, there is no ambiguity in A. Bartlett Giamatti's *The University and the Public Interest* where he attacks the notion of Emerson as "the Lover of Nature, a sweet, sentimental, Yankee Kahlil Gibran," saying Emerson is about "as sweet as barbed wire, and his sentimentality as accommodating as a brick" (174). Giamatti finds

²¹ Bercovitch is not alone in badly misreading Fukuyama's esoteric and Straussian intentions. I discuss this further in relation to Jacques Derrida in "Contretemps: Derrida's Ante and the Call of Marxist Philosophy."

Emerson's influence on American culture and politics poisonous. He has "infected" us with scorn for the past and custom, and with xenophobia (175). Emerson's individual, is Giamatti feels, a selfish, power-seeking, rootless beast. He blames Emerson for creating "a new technocrat of force" that has ruined both American politics and any aspect of public service that calls for civility.

For David Leverenz, in the chapter "The Politics of Emerson's Man-Making Words," in *Manhood and the American Renaissance*, Emerson's disdain for the masses is mixed up with his resentment towards his father, his strained and disrespectful relation to the women around him, and some sense of male rivalry. Leverenz's study, like Bercovitch's, places Emerson in opposition to the standards of his society. For Leverenz, Emerson's notions of manhood are in opposition to a liberal, capitalist definition of manhood based in competition and possessions, money and property. To be a man for Emerson, Leverenz claims, to no one's surprise, is to escape conformity "either to the rivalries of the marketplace, where men become things, or to the suffocations of domestic gentility, where men became women" (47). Leverenz recognizes an elitist core beneath Emerson's seemingly democratic surface, but Emerson is not, for Leverenz, the ideologue of the businessman or the imperialist, which a certain "Emerson" certainly became (52). Emerson's idea of an elite transcends the material, and Leverenz accurately recognizes that Emerson attempts to fashion, through the powers of eloquence, the few into a powerful class that can harness the energy of the contemptuous, barbaric many (57). Whereas Bercovitch focuses on Emerson's opposition to (or is it support of?) "individualism," Leverenz reads Emerson's opposition to vulgar, destructive, and aimless "radicalism." Leverenz's historicizing, pseudo-materialist psychoanalytic approach to

Emerson, however, blinds him to an important factor. Emerson may have insisted “on manly power as the essence of mental energy,” but for Emerson “manly” was “virtuous” (*vir*: man, virile; *virtu*: strength, manliness). Emerson’s “man-making” words have little or nothing to do with the kinds of “family romance” politics Leverenz refers to, nothing to do with father or mother or brother, but are the basis of a rhetoric and a theory of eloquence meant to transform the vulgar materialism of American society into a virtuous regime modeled on the ancients. Emerson’s “manly” is Plutarch’s “virtue”—the heroic, the Stoic, the Spartan.

Bercovitch, Lopez, and Newfield take Emerson seriously, assuming that he means what he says and that what he says is “political,” but since none of them take Emerson seriously as a student of political philosophy, they are forced to try to make sense of Emerson as merely a nineteenth century figure or as a somewhat vague source of or, contrarily, resistance to “middle-class ideology.” To grasp Emerson’s political philosophy and his intentions, though, it is necessary to abandon the impulse to “historicize” Emerson. Though his times are different on the surface from the times of the ancients, Emerson recognizes that human society and human nature is always the same. Hence, his “teachings” and his “method” are the “same” as the others in this tradition, as are his “ends.” This tradition is profoundly anti-democratic and is not above creating ideologies that work to deceive the many to get them to accept their subservience. It is an anti-enlightenment tradition that believes that rank ordering is “natural” and the attempt to legislate it away, to democratically level citizens, is detrimental to human excellence.

Since almost no one believes Emerson has anything to hide and since almost everyone believes Emerson means most of what he says (when what he says agrees with them), many argue that Emerson was “democratic” and that his thinking is useful in attempts to theorize democracy as it is or democracy to come. Cornell West, Stanley Cavell, and George Kateb are perhaps the most “serious” thinkers to have written about Emerson (since they are philosophers), but their readings of Emerson are often flat and without nuance. Though literary critics may not take Emerson “seriously” as a philosopher, as these do, their readings tend to be more insightful about Emerson as a writer (and indirectly, therefore, as a political philosopher) because they pay more careful attention to the level of the text than these philosophers who too quickly move to manhandling Emerson’s ideas, forcing them to fit into a particular type of philosophical thinking. While West, Cavell, and Kateb pay ritual tribute to Emerson’s textual inconsistencies, they pass them off as merely literary elements and never deviate from their presupposition that Emerson is primarily a single-minded theorist of democracy and that all of his terms and concepts can be understood unproblematically as “liberal-democratic.” Their inability to read Emerson as a writer—a political philosopher, an esotericist—prevents them, in my opinion, from truly grasping what is at stake. Perhaps the primary problem these philosophers face when reading Emerson is Emerson’s Platonist understanding of the relationship between the city and man. Because they begin with their own (post)modern assumptions about what philosophy is (or was or will be) and what democracy is (or will be), they cannot make sense of one whose assumptions are always ancient, whose writing is always multileveled and addressed to two different audiences simultaneously, and whose politics are always ironic.

Cornel West's chapter "The Emersonian Prehistory of American Pragmatism," in *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, begins in a usual place, noting that Emerson "defies disciplinary classification" (9). West takes Emerson at his word and assumes there can be no irony when in a journal entry Emerson "confesses" to lack the logical precision necessary to be a rigorous philosopher. West (quixotically) wrests a philosophical stance from Emerson's writings which he says aims to explain America to itself and to "weave novel notions of power, provocation, and personality into a potent and emerging ideology of voluntaristic invulnerability and utopian possibility" (10). This Emersonian weaving "bequeaths a legacy of cultural critiques, pragmatic ideologies, and reform efforts," even if "present-day American civilization vulgarized Emerson's hope for personal emancipation" (10). Building on this confusing set of terms and irreconcilable set of positions, West continues to explain that Emerson was "an organic intellectual primarily preoccupied with the crisis of a moribund religious tradition, a nascent industrial order, and, most important, a postcolonial and imperialist nation unsure of itself and unsettled about its future" (11). He goes on to list as Emerson's dominant themes, "individuality, idealism, voluntarism, optimism, amelioration, and experimentation," which prefigure American pragmatism, the topic West attempts to arrive at by way of Emerson (35). One can probably find these elements of pragmatism in Emerson if one looks hastily through Emerson's canonized texts, but simply because West or other pragmatists or democrats find useful ideas in Emerson does not indicate that Emerson is, therefore, on their side.²²

²² For another reading of Emerson's pragmatism, see Mark Bauerlein, *The Pragmatic Mind*.

West's Emerson is a conglomeration of the usual (unrecognized yet contradictory) things about Emerson with the addition of an overlay of pseudo-Gramscian categories. West, like Cavell, attempts to turn Emerson's "aversive" thinking into the repressed founding of American philosophy. West's pre-Deweyian Emerson "ingeniously and skillfully" refused philosophy's "quest for certainty" and "its search for foundations" because these were "antiquated, anachronistic, and outdated *relative to his chosen tasks*" (36). While West insists Emerson evades *modern* philosophy, he never seems to countenance that Emerson does so for ancient reasons and thus West cannot truly see Emerson's chosen tasks, which he claims to understand *better* than Emerson did. Instead, West's is the usual story: Emerson rightly evades modern philosophy and boldly sets tradition aside in the defiantly democratic exercise of his "intellectual self-reliance" (37). For West, Emerson's philosophy could be summarized almost as, "Whatever it is, I'm against it." West, however, because he attempts to turn Emerson into what he is not, cannot figure out how Emerson can at once "castigate[] the vulgarity and crudity of the Jacksonians" yet seem to voice their democratic ideas; therefore, he simply accepts this ambiguity and contradiction as "Emersonian." West is unable to make sense of Emerson as anything but a jumble of contradictory elements is typical, and thus he gives us no real insight into Emerson. "Emerson is neither a liberal nor a conservative and certainly not a socialist or even civic republican," writes West. For West, Emerson is finally "a petit bourgeois libertarian," with "anarchist tendencies and limited yet genuine democratic sentiments" (40).

George Kateb's *Emerson and Self-Reliance* is a meditation on Emerson's paradoxical way of seeming to be an enemy to things democratic yet somehow still be the

obligatory figure to discuss when the topic is (American) democracy. Kateb's interpretation of Emerson centers on the concept of self-reliance, which he seems to accept in its most commonsense connotation, since he does not seem aware that Emerson drew upon the Stoics, and particularly Plutarch, in his development of his concept. Kateb desperately wants to keep Emerson in the democratic camp; therefore, to explain how Emerson's anti-democratic thinking is somehow still democratic, Kateb devises two categories for self-reliance: mental self-reliance and active self-reliance. The first is the usual fare. One is mentally self-reliant by maintaining one's own thought, by not being influenced, and so on. This is necessary, Kateb claims, for democratic citizenship. While this may be true ideally, Kateb does not seem disturbed that Emerson is almost never interested in democratic citizenship, calling citizens in democracies rabble or the mob, and, like Nietzsche, considering them a herd to be managed by those who by right or by birth ought to rule over them. Kateb hopes to explain Emerson's reluctance to dirty his hands in the reforms of his day by arguing that mental self-reliance is primary to democracy, but that sometimes it is necessary to leave one's solitude and risk one's self-reliance by engaging in political affairs. Active self-reliance, a deviation from independent mental self-reliance, forces one to conform to the thoughts of others, but if all are (what?) mentally self-reliant, then (what?) democracy truly occurs (?) since these actions are attempts to give every American a chance for self-reliance (178). Kateb's "self-reliance" in the end sounds like the repugnant, monadic "individualism" Bercovitch discusses, not the "individuality" that I think he means.

What makes me most unsympathetic to these philosophers' readings of Emerson is that when they intend to take Emerson "seriously" they only read him "literally"

according to their historicist prejudices. Though they claim to recognize that Emerson mobilizes ambiguity, they believe what this ironist says without question. Their hermeneutic is based on the assumption that Emerson means what he says and that he is in no way speaking on different levels or to different audiences. Emerson, like Nietzsche, is successful at getting readers to take him at his word even while telling them again and again that he lies, writes in parables, and knowingly uses inconsistency.

Len Gougeon, in *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform*, makes a rather desperate claim in his conclusion that his entire argument has tried to establish: "Ralph Waldo Emerson was a committed social reformer all of his life" (337). In *Virtue's Hero* and in the introductory chapter to *Emerson's Antislavery Writings* ("Historical Background"), Gougeon narrates a story of Emerson as a reluctant activist, one who felt strongly about the issue of slavery yet whose temperament made him uncomfortable with the tenor of the public debate about it. Though Gougeon relates that Emerson signed many petitions, participated in many abolitionist movements, and spoke out against anti-abolitionists, it is never clear that for Emerson one group was any less a vulgar and odious mob than the other in the end. Philosophically disgusted by slavery as an example of man's inhumanity to man, Emerson was as equally disgusted by many of the arguments from abolitionists, which were based in a vulgar version of the rights of man, and by abolitionist capitalists and politicians, since their motivations were selfishly economic and not virtuous. Gougeon rightly points out that Emerson was always more of a moral reformer than a social reformer; individuals had to change before society could. Gougeon also perceptively notes that Emerson always sought a higher law, even though in practice he tended to support the ideologies of laissez-faire capitalism and of the

businessmen. Gougeon has a difficult time, however, separating Emerson from those who would appropriate him against reform movements, since Emerson was often silent, cool, or ambiguous (soft-spoken) about reform. Like Kateb, however, Gougeon finds an Emerson who will enter the public fray when he decides a thing is so evil that only an organized social movement could combat it.

Gougeon's work is extremely valuable in any attempt to argue one side or the other about Emerson's practical politics. Here, however, I am less interested in Emerson's commitment to any particular political issue than in his philosophical orientation to politics, which, I argue, positions him against any single issue that does not seek to actualize a higher law in human societies. I do not doubt that Emerson was opposed to actually-existing slavery and that his opposition was moral and individualistic, but the difficulty Gougeon has in following Emerson's torturous path on this issue results not from a lack of attention and dedication but from a lack of understanding Emerson's political philosophy. Nietzsche believes slavery was abolished because being too full of pity we could no longer bear the sight of it. The virtue Nietzsche wants to teach is one that not only can bear the sight of slavery but also acknowledge that great culture demands slavery. If Emerson opposes slavery as it existed in the United States, it is because he opposes the vulgar capitalism and democratic politics of the United States. American culture is debased, selfish, and materialistic. Its institution of slavery does not go to provide leisure for the few to produce great culture. Instead, it merely goes to show how vulgar we are, how base.

Gougeon feels that Emerson never fully resolved for himself the question of racial difference or inferiority. Philip L. Nicoloff's *Emerson on Race and History*, still

probably the best book on this topic, explains why this might be so by comparing Emerson's study of nineteenth century science, ethnology, and anthropology (which he notes came to be seen as "proto-Fascist" [4]) to his study of philosophy and politics. Nicoloff recognizes that Emerson did not consider race a matter of skin color so much as a matter of nation, culture, or civilization. This is something Anita Hays Patterson does not seem to consider in *From Emerson to King: Democracy, Race, and the Politics of Protest*. Patterson's book is driven by a particular anxiety. Noting that she is "not interested in presenting yet another 'revisionary' reading of Emerson which amounts to nothing more than a politically correct charge of racism" (7), she perhaps bends the stick a little too far in the other direction. Since such famed African-American theorists of freedom and democracy, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cornel West, had recourse to Emerson in their discourses, Patterson attempts to construct a way of reading Emerson that does not excuse his "racialist" language but that does (in contemporary parlance) open up a way to critique liberalism since it "introduces 'race' as a category into the field of liberal nationalist thought" (153). Thus, Emerson, whose writings justify violent westward expansion and maintain an ideology of black inferiority while seeming to proclaim the potential for human equality, is, Patterson claims, "innovative."

Patterson takes Emerson's well-known contradictoriness to extremes. Her constant comparison between Emerson's theories and Locke's on property and citizenship are illuminating, but I doubt Emerson was as interested in Locke as Patterson is. I agree that Emerson opposed Lockean liberalism, not because of his careful engagement with Locke but because he had serious (ancient) philosophical reservations

about a Lockean organization of society. For Patterson, however, Emerson opposed “the Lockean, liberal model of civil society as a community of autonomous, self-owning citizens who have been brought into association with one another by acts of voluntary consent to a social contract” because it was not “intimate or cohesive enough to represent his vision of America” (4). Though Emerson despised Lockean liberalism, this had little to do with its less than utopian or intimate individualism and much more to do with its dissemination of democracy, its lack of unified source of leadership and of a sovereign who decides, and its lack of a higher law or myth that establishes and justifies “natural” hierarchies.

Perhaps Patterson fits better into the contemporary “both/and” style of thinking than I do, but I cannot imagine how anyone—even the writer of such an argument—can believe the kinds of statements Patterson makes. She writes that Emerson “simultaneously opposes and promotes mainstream American ideals such as the right to private ownership and self-ownership, individual autonomy, and the notion that legitimate government and community are created by voluntary acts of consent to social contract” (5). For her, Emerson’s thought on representativeness simultaneously affirms “democratic universalisms and racist exclusions” while facilitating and barring “access to the public realm” (21). Somehow, despite “the obvious, gross incompatibility between, on the one hand, Emerson’s racist depiction of ‘savages’ whose Lockean rights to property are violated and, on the other hand, his claim that the rights Columbus bears are democratically extended to every man,” Emerson is still a “useful” figure whose “contradictory logic” is somehow “good,” whose “tense, tenuous, rhetorical settlement between his democratic, antislavery convictions and his racial nationalism” is still

somehow “productive” (48). To my mind, one cannot hold such opposing points of view and be one person—unless that person practices the ancient art of esotericism. This is not, however, a claim Patterson indicates anywhere about herself or Emerson.

If Emerson’s thinking on issues of race contains elements of esotericism, then Patterson gets lost in the confusions of the exoteric surface, as do, perhaps, Du Bois, King, and West who “use” Emerson to support their ideas. Patterson writes that her book “emphasizes the radical potential and historical influence of Emerson’s rhetoric as a mode of protest that uses the master’s tools to reform the master’s house, so to speak, drawing on mainstream values and ideals in articulating the need for social change” (footnote 9, 204). While Emerson certainly has been “used” in the fight for equality and against racism, his influence is more like an infection, and until it is seen for what it is, the master’s house is still the master’s house, though now it has servant’s quarters. Patterson has her doubts, but she moves on nonetheless: “It is difficult to see how such a reactionary idea of reform could have influenced someone as radical and politically active as Martin Luther King Jr.” (98). It is also difficult to understand why someone with such good political intentions as Patterson, intentions with which I am in full sympathy, would want to ground her argument in Emerson. In her engagement with him as a contradictory thinker, in her attempts to transmute his racism into a critique of the market relations of a liberal social order, in her attempts to detoxify this inheritance, Patterson fails to understand the philosophical core of Emerson’s (only apparent) contradictions.

Nicoloff’s older study is much better in this regard. For Nicoloff, Emerson’s racism is incidental to his politics. Nicoloff’s Emerson more closely resembles the Carl

Schmitt of *The Concept of the Political*, or, more recently, Samuel L. Huntington in “The Clash of Civilizations?” Nicoloff recognizes that for Emerson, races are “national disguises” and nations-as-races (what Schmitt calls the state as a specific entity of a people and Huntington calls civilizations) “must engage in some competitive struggle if the ends of destiny [are] to be fulfilled” (125). For Schmitt, this struggle is between friends (the state as a homogeneous political unit with definite borders it will defend to the death) and foes (any entity that poses an existential threat); for Huntington, this is a clash of civilizations which occurs when particular civilizational identities are threatened by the homogenizing influence of Western culture or by global capitalist and atheistic culture. Nicoloff also recognizes how Emerson’s theory of race fits into this political and philosophical thinking to support the idea (in Nietzsche’s terms) of rank ordering.

Nicoloff does not flinch before Emerson’s definite ideas about hierarchy and the ultimate rightness of hierarchies. He is not fooled by Emerson’s at once calling Africans “savages” while bemoaning America’s lack of savagery on the world stage (127).

Instead of treating Emerson’s theories of race as opening up a space for critique, Nicoloff recognizes how Emerson’s ideas about race and democracy lead him to worry about the weakening of America as a political power, creating what Nietzsche (and later Fukuyama) will call the age of the Last Man. Race is almost never about simple racism in Emerson, though Emerson could share the racism, and sexism, of his “age.” It is always about civilization, and Emerson learned from reading nineteenth century ethnologists that race-as-civilization “determined everything: literature, science, wealth, art, religion, language, laws, and morals” (143). To understand Emerson’s thoughts on civilization, it would serve us better to read him alongside a different company than we

are used to doing. It is the tradition of the intransigent Right, of Gaetano Mosca's *The Ruling Class*, Joseph de Maistre's *Considerations on France* and *On God and Society*, Juan Donoso Cortés' *On Order*, Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, Francis Fukuyama, and Samuel P. Huntington, to name only a few, that illuminates Emerson best, not the liberal Left of a DuBois or a King.

This inability to come to terms with Emerson's politics, and his philosophy, is evident throughout the texts of those who write about Emerson. It is analogous to the inability to come to terms with his rhetorical ambiguity. Whether the topic is Emerson's politics, his philosophy, or his rhetoric, the criticism is schizophrenic, or seems to think Emerson is schizophrenic. His ambiguity serves one side to prove he is democratic and serves the other side to prove he is not. However, Emerson is more complicated than this. While I do not offer my method of reading Emerson as the way to resolve all the difficulties Emerson presents to problems of the relations between philosophy, politics, and writing, I do think that only after one recognizes a method to Emerson's seeming madness, only after one recognizes that he is an ironist and an esotericist, only after one acknowledges that his thinking is ancient and not modern, can one ever truly begin to understand his political, philosophical, and rhetorical ambiguity.

If Emerson rejects modern philosophy, as West argues, or if his thinking is "aversive," as Cavell claims, it is not because he seeks to further the development of a progressive, enlightened democracy. It is because he considers modern philosophy—and the West—to have lost its way. Emerson seeks to return to the ancient questions. He seeks to ground society in a sense of purpose and belief—even if for him that grounding is in the form of a noble lie. His belief in power is Nietzschean, as Lopez claims, but for

Nietzsche the ultimate purpose of power is to establish belief in (rank) order(ing), not to relativize all beliefs or open them up for liberal-democratic discussion. Emerson is a Platonist, like Nietzsche, who cares little for “truth.” He studies tradition and history to uncover what will establish the best political order—the rule of philosophers. If he rejects “modern” philosophy, it is because he can learn more from the ancients about how to live. The “original relation to the universe” Emerson claims to seek in *Nature* is not a *new* relationship to the universe, but the *original* relationship the ancients had.

Emerson’s rejection of modern philosophy is based in his opening himself up to the original, ancient questions, and the only way to recover these questions and to redirect politics from its “progressive” path is to return to reading old books. Nature and old books provide evidence that laws and regimes ought to be ordered according to principles higher than merely human “rights.” Emerson seeks what is right and best by nature; he seeks a politics of duty, not rights; he seeks what is good in all times and all places, not in a particular time or place. By nature, some are stronger; some are wiser. It is these who ought to rule and to decide, not the masses. He seeks to educate and form a human type to rule, not to be merely one individual among many.

If critics have difficulty making sense of Emerson’s aloofness and engagement, his combinations of gravity and levity, it is because they do not read him as a Platonist political philosopher for whom the best life is the philosophical contemplation of the whole. The best life is in communing with the greatest minds by reading old books; it is leisurely research, conversation, and relentless questioning; it is detachment. This is the noble way, not dirtying one’s hand in the questions of the day. When Emerson does dirty his hands, as these critics note, he was often criticized for not dirtying them enough. But

Emerson's intention is always to redirect the questions at hand towards higher goals, not solve them according to the existing terms of the debate.

His interventions into the politics of his time were prudent interventions. A philosopher's true and uncensored questions and doubts could dangerously unsettle the customary bonds that knit society together, and this could prove, as it did for Socrates, dangerous to the philosopher. Emerson could, however, employ a rhetoric that makes public his questions and doubts, exposes the virtues and vices of particular political stances, yet speaks differently to different audiences. Even if he engages in the difficult questions of his day, it is to remind the philosophically inclined among his readers and listeners that the true questions always concern what is best, most virtuous, and most moral. He could enlarge the horizon of his careful readers and listeners, teaching them the virtues of the life of the mind, of the necessity of patience and piety. If he questions Lockean acquisitive liberalism and capitalist moneymaking, it is not out of a desire to institute greater equality and democracy. If he questions the slavish obedience to religious tradition, it is not to reform religious tradition. Emerson as a philosopher calls attention to the prejudices that blind his contemporaries to more noble issues. If he praises war, it is not that he embodies the nineteenth century's glorification of power, but because war unites nations, teaches the virtues of patriotism, and teaches a people the need for a higher purpose to distinguish themselves from their enemies. If he harps on manliness, it is to create virtuous heroes, and is not driven by some psychological fear of women. If he speaks of liberty and democracy, if he speaks against conformity, it is to teach "the few" the way toward the best life—the life of a philosopher—not to create new legislation.

The Esoteric Emerson

Of a large and powerful class we might ask with confidence, What is the event they most desire? What gift? What but the book that shall come, which they have sought through all libraries, through all languages, that shall be to their mature eyes what many a tinsel-covered toy pamphlet was to their childhood, and shall speak to their imagination?

—Emerson, "Quotation and Originality" (W 8:169-70)

But there are men too superior to be seen except by the few, as there are notes too high for the scale of most ears.

—Emerson, "Table Talk" (*Uncollected* 33)

What if Emerson is not the man or the thinker most believe he is? What if he presented his views on the most important topics exclusively between the lines? What if the thousands of books and articles written about Emerson as a poetic, mystical, progressive, naturalist have mistaken Emerson for what he was not? Would such an error be attributable to Emerson or to methods of reading that fail to read what was written between the lines? If "reading between the lines will not lead to complete agreement among all scholars," as Strauss contends, such a method certainly will not lead to complete agreement when dealing with Emerson whom everybody always already feels they know whether they have only read him in high school, or on a hiking trip, or more seriously—or never read him at all.

Emerson is not only aware of the exoteric-esoteric distinction as it existed in the Platonist tradition, but he also consciously uses it in his own writings and provides ample hints that he does so. Emerson took it as his duty and his right as an initiate and conservator of this tradition to practice esotericism, for he too was convinced that philosophy was suspect or hated by the majority of men so the public communication of his true teachings was impossible or undesirable not only for the time being but for all

times. Emerson writes, "God himself does not speak prose, but communicates by hints, omens, inferences, and dark resemblances in objects lying all around us" (W 8:17), and if the *via indirectio* is good enough for God, its practice must certainly be noble for him.

To claim there exists an "esoteric conspiracy" of ancient or medieval philosophers to conceal their true teachings is one thing, and most are duty bound to dismiss such speculation. To place Emerson in this company, however, is another thing altogether. Critics and readers alike consider Emerson's writings "American Scripture" or the basis of "the American Religion" (see Charles Howell Foster and Harold Bloom) and a part of the canon of great books. Like other canonized writings, Emerson's can perhaps be said to have two teachings: a popular (exoteric) teaching of an edifying character in the foreground and a philosophic (esoteric) teaching concerning the most important subject(s), indicated only between the lines. Emerson writes in "Poetry and Imagination," "All writings must be in a degree exoteric, written to a human *should* or *would*, instead of to the fatal *is*: this holds true even of the bravest and sincerest of writers" (W 8:34). Exoteric books, Strauss teaches, are addressed to neither non-philosophers nor philosophers, but to young men who might become philosophers, to potential philosophers who can be led step by step from popular views, which are indispensable for all practical, rhetorical, and political purposes, to "the truth which is merely and purely theoretical" guided only by certain enigmatic features ("obscurity of plan, contradictions, pseudonyms, inexact repetitions of earlier statements, strange expressions") that do not disturb the slumber of the many, but are "awakening stumbling blocks" for the few. Infamously, Strauss states: "All books of that kind owe their existence to the love of the mature philosopher for the puppies of his race, by whom he

wants to be loved in turn: all exoteric books are 'written speeches caused by love'" (PAW 36). "Exoteric literature," he notes, "presupposes that there are basic truths which would not be pronounced in public by any decent man, because they would do harm to many people who, having been hurt, would naturally be inclined to hurt in turn him who pronounces the unpleasant truths" (PAW 36).

In this chapter, I have drawn on political philosophers not usually associated with Emerson in order to establish the contours of an esoteric hermeneutic that will provide greater access to Emerson's writing. In the following chapters, I ground these wild sets of association in evidence that Emerson, and those he read, are best read as esotericists who, as Platonists, provisionally acceded to accepted opinion in order to avoid conflict with the vulgar in their attempt to gradually replace those accepted opinions in a patient attempt to create the best regime. These readings of Emerson and of his readings of Plutarch, Montaigne, Bacon, and Coleridge will show how these writers couched their Platonist political philosophy in the guise of moral essays. As wise men, they could live safely under their forms of government by never openly expressing what is forbidden and by never writing their deepest thoughts without their being cloaked by obscurity.

CHAPTER 3
EMERSON'S PROLEPTIC ELOQUENCE¹

Strategemata

The ameliorating presence of spirit, using to great ends what is base and cheap, teaches in a very impressive manner. The order of the world has been wisely called "an open secret." And it is true that Nature's mode of concealing a law is in its very simplicity; she hides facts by putting them next to us. Where is that power not present? Where are the crypts in which Nature has deposited her secret and notched every day of her thousand millenniums? In facts that stare at us all day; in the slab of the pavement, the stone of the wall, the side of the hill, the gravel of the brook.

—Emerson, "Humanity of Science" (EL 2:31)

Men dead and buried now for some thousands of years affect my mode of being much more than some of my contemporaries.

—Emerson, "Introductory" Lecture, Human Culture Series (1837-38) (EL 2:224)

There have always been reasons to dissemble, for there has always been some force or institution to take into account. The price of Socrates' speaking openly in the marketplace, of interrogating his city's beliefs and encouraging his fellow citizens to know themselves (or know for themselves) was execution. Some say Socrates was a pious man who led youth to worship the city's gods and revere the justice of its laws, but his simple questions and his professions of ignorance were too much for his city to bear. Socrates showed the social order—its laws, gods, and traditions—rested on nothing more solid than an agreement to accept today what was passed on to us from yesterday. Philosophers after him who wished to pursue a life of speculation and contemplation, who felt a greater allegiance to truth than to opinion, were compelled by the threat or fear

¹ A shorter version of this chapter was published as "Emerson's Proleptic Eloquence" in *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 27:2 (2000): 79-99.

of execution, persecution, or exile to discover means by which to reconcile their mode of being with that of the city's. Certain stratagems and rhetorics had to be mastered, and philosophy had, by necessity, to become *political philosophy*.

"Stratagem," as Everett L. Wheeler points out in *Stratagem and the Vocabulary of Military Trickery*, was originally a legal concept "found in the laws of war as well as a strategic and tactical idea" (xiii). A "stratagem" was

a strategic or tactical act of trickery, deceit, or cunning in military affairs and especially war, whereby one attempts to gain psychological or material advantage over an opponent, to neutralize some part of an opponent's superiority, to minimize one's own expenditure of resources, or to restore the morale and physical state of one's own forces. (Wheeler x-xi)

The stratagem, however, quickly lent itself to conceptual and metaphorical uses in rhetoric, philosophy, politics, and other non-military contexts.

Xenophon, Socrates' other great student and himself a famed general, in his *Memorabilia* tells of Socrates instructing young men who were entering public life on the necessity of gaining proper knowledge of their duties and responsibilities. One young man, Pericles, having returned from studying the art of being a general (στρατηγῶ; *stratego*: to be a general, to out general or out maneuver, to contrive) under Dionysodorus, told Socrates that the beginning and end of Dionysodorus' teaching was the same: he taught *tactics*. For Xenophon's Socrates, knowledge of tactics alone is not sufficient. Since "the whole state, in the perils of war, is entrusted to the care of the general," Socrates says, "it is likely that great advantages will occur if he acts well, and great evils if he falls into error" (3.1.3). However, Socrates is not blind to the fact that even this preliminary knowledge of mere tactics effected a transformation in the young man's character.

Socrates compares learning the art of generalship to becoming trained in music or medicine. Once one has learned the art of the lyre or of healing, one is a lyrist or a physician even when one is not practicing the art. Once having learned the art of a general (στρατηγικός/*strategikos*), this youth will forever be a general, “though no one may elect him to command” (3.1.4). However, Xenophon’s Socrates says, this art is composed of more than tactics. A proper general must be

skilful in preparing what is necessary for war, able in securing provisions for his troops, a man of great contrivance and activity, careful, persevering, and sagacious; kind, and yet severe; open, yet crafty; careful of his own, yet ready to steal from others; profuse, yet rapacious; lavish of presents, yet eager to acquire money; cautious, yet enterprising; and many other qualities there are, both natural and acquired, which he, who would fill the office of general with ability, must possess. (3.1.6)

Tactics and arrangement are good, says Socrates, but when the youth tells of his training in placing the bravest troops in the front and rear and the cowardly in the middle, Socrates asks if he has learned how to distinguish between the brave and cowardly, or the good and bad, and how to decide what goes in the middle.² Was he taught all the ends

² For the esotericist, what goes in the middle is always decisive. The most “public” parts of texts or speeches are their beginnings and ends, the places where an esotericist places his salutary teachings. The esotericist hides in the middle those esoteric teachings meant for those who read carefully. When Socrates asks about what goes in the middle, however, he was probably thinking of communities of warriors where what goes in the middle (*en messōi*) is also decisive. Marcel Detienne describes how in Greek tribes of warriors, prizes for winning competitions, booty, and captured enemies were placed in the middle. It was “the most visible site for the assembled crowd” (92), but it perhaps also hid what was in the middle from those outside. In military assemblies, when claiming the right to speak one had to “first move to the center and then take hold of the scepter” (95). Detienne writes, “the *meson* was the public place par excellence” (97), but it was more importantly perhaps a private space for those of a private community of *aristoi* to share things only they could share. Detienne also notes that communities of warriors, who were bound not by blood or kinship but by age into fraternities with initiatory rituals meant to guarantee their differences from others, served as the origin of civil society.

towards which troops might be arranged? Socrates sends this young general back for further instruction with the right questions to ask.

Wheeler's study distinguishes between the Achilles ethos and the Odysseus ethos in ancient military thinking. The Achilles ethos is one of chivalry, of preferring honest, open, and declared use of force or face-to-face confrontation to deception. The Odysseus ethos is one of indirection, of preferring to avoid a physical battle if possible by means of trickery, deceit, or psychological ruses, and of fighting only when the use of force is unavoidable or if a pitched battle is more advantageous (xiv). Wheeler's delineation of the vocabulary of stratagems finds that the qualities deemed necessary for effective stratagems include: *anchinoia/pronoia* (quickness of thought, or the ability to grasp instantly the expedient and act accordingly), *phronesis/prudentia* (prudence; perception of what ought to be done or what ought not to be done; ability to recognize the enemy's stratagems and to keep the enemy ignorant of one's own), *deinotes* (cleverness), *technē/ars* (skill, artifice, fraud; ability to provide the device [*mechane*] for escaping difficulty; ability to solve in thought what is not yet present in reality). A good general would also be able to use a variety of tricks (*dolos*, the Trojan horse being the most famous example) and lies (*pseudos*)³, as Odysseus, who was *polymetis*, did. *Metis*, signifying cunning intelligence and opportunism, combines flair, wisdom, foresight, subtlety, deceptiveness, resourcefulness, and vigilance. Wheeler notes that *metis* appears

³ For example, providing *pseudoangeliai* (false reports), using *pseudoangelos* (false messengers), *pseudoboethia* (appearing behind an enemy before or during a battle; sounding trumpets, stirring up dust, or otherwise creating the impression of a rear attack), *pseudephodos* (feigning attack at one point, striking at another), *pseudoprodosia* (disseminating false information), *pseudautomalia* (luring the enemy into a false more or into a trap), *pseudopanika* (creating a false panic), and *pseudopyra* (false campfires). See Wheeler (39-41).

in shifting, disconcerting, or ambiguous situations where calculative reason or rigorous logic fail.

Plato's *Lesser Hippias* examines the difference between the Achilles and Odysseus ethos in a non-military context. In this dialogue, Socrates asks the arrogant Sophist Hippias, who claims to be an expert in nearly all the arts and to know Homer's intention better than Homer did himself, who is the better man: the soldier Achilles or the general Odysseus (364b)? Hippias argues that Achilles is the best man, for he is an honest, virtuous hero, and though Odysseus is the most "versatile" (*polytropos*), he is dishonest and is a liar. Socrates, who claims to know nothing, during his conversation with Hippias, who boasts he knows about everything, turns Hippias' argument so the moral difference between the dishonest and the honest man is no longer obvious. A liar, Socrates gets Hippias to agree, is capable, prudent, knowledgeable, and wise concerning those things about which he lies (360a). Only one expert in his art can be said to be good, so only a good man can capably either lie or tell the truth (367c). The inexpert are ignorant, incapable, and, therefore, bad. A liar like Odysseus lies or tells the truth voluntarily and by design (370e, 371e). Hippias agrees with Socrates that the more capable soul is the more just and the soul which goes wrong involuntarily is less than just (375b, e), but neither Hippias nor Socrates wants to believe this dialogue's "necessary result"—"he who voluntarily goes wrong and does what is shameful and unjust, Hippias, if indeed there is any such person, would be no other than the good man" (376b).

For James Leake, Plato's *Lesser Hippias*, by contrasting *polymathia* with *polymetis* or *polytropos*, demonstrates, through the figures of Achilles and Odysseus, the necessity of the politic art of lying plausibly (300-01). Leake comments:

To be a liar as Odysseus was, one must be experienced, prudent, and of an enduring toughness. One must be aware of one's own limits and of the limits of others. One must know how to appeal to others and understand just the right approach for getting them to do what is necessary. To be a consummate liar means to know what is necessary and to know the souls of those who must contribute to accomplish it. To be a consummate liar is the aspect of being wise that consists in using and helping others. (304)

A good general is a good liar, a good strategist, and a good rhetorician. He knows how to gain psychological advantage over an opponent, neutralize an enemy's strengths, but more importantly, his lying is a benevolent act. This art of the stratagem is then, among other things, a rhetorical art, for in Aristotle's definition, rhetoric is the capability (power or faculty) of "observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (*Rhetoric* 1355b 26-7). Rhetoric or eloquence, like politics and philosophy, needs to comprehend and properly judge the capacities of an audience and recognize the limits of reason or of reasoning with others. Therefore, the arts of lying and of persuasion are necessary in the arts of politics and of ruling, Leake writes, because often both friends and enemies are incapable of reason, or are made incompetent, due to passion, or simply lack the natural ability to understand for themselves what is good (304). The capable, eloquent, and benevolent rhetorician, philosopher, politician, legislator, general—or liar—is capable of doing (has the power to do) as he wishes with human beings, "using lies or truth as is appropriate, according to circumstances" (304). Such a legislator or philosopher hates the "real lie" but not the useful one, which can be deployed in battle against enemies or as preventative medicine for friends who are heading in the wrong direction. They might also, as Plato writes elsewhere, use noble lies—myths, fables, parables—when the origins of things are unclear (*Republic* 382c-d, 414b-415d) or when their interlocutors cannot handle the hard truth (*Republic* 331c).

Emerson demonstrates his knowledge of the many aspects of the art of generalship, of lying, of rhetoric, and of philosophy even in his earliest writings. As provisional or initiatory teachings, Emerson's early texts perform several functions. Young General Emerson—open yet crafty—demonstrates his capability to discern the limits of reason in his audience and in the times. Cautious, yet enterprising, he deploys stratagems that draw some in, magnetizing them to his teachings, and keep others out—the unmagnetized keep as they are. By their rhetoric, his writings divide the audience, or reveal already-existing natural divisions.

Many who read Emerson enjoy what seems to be exuberant optimism and spirituality, and they never get beyond the exoteric level. However, Emerson's texts contain other teachings between the lines that attempt to sort out the few who understand philosophers speak esoterically, who understand the necessity of rejecting the "old" teachings of the Enlightenment and accepting new (really ancient) teachings, and who will be capable of taking on the long task of educating themselves (and later others) in the teachings necessary for a new founding. Emerson's multileveled texts attempt to draw the spiritually adventurous few away from the allures of modern times to create an audience that understands the necessity and the rigors of discipline, virtue, and rank. Initially appealing to his audience's sense of self or individuality, Emerson flatters the few who think themselves individuals and, should they be made curious by Emerson's appeal, he draws them out from the crowd and impels them to further distinguish themselves by taking on what is difficult. While teaching the possibility of the heroic, however, Emerson's texts also teach the necessity of discipline and obedience, or, in Francis Bacon's terms, how to command by obeying.

The Young Emerson

He must be a very young critic who supposes that the man of literary genius has any option of the mode in which he shall write for his fellow man.

—Emerson, "Lecture on Literature" (EL 2:60)

The youth of great men is seldom marked by any peculiarities which arrest observation. Their minds have secret workings; and, though they feel and enjoy the consciousness of genius, they seldom betray prognostics of greatness.

—Emerson, "The Character of Socrates" (TUP 11)

Emerson's thinking about philosophy and politics as moral activity began while a student at Harvard. In 1820, the seventeen-year-old Emerson submitted "The Character of Socrates" for the Bowdoin dissertation prize, and in 1821, "The Present State of Ethical Philosophy." Though these won no prizes, Emerson read the essays before an audience of professors and his fellow undergraduates. With these essays, Emerson begins his lifelong examination of the battle between the ancients and the moderns and situates himself clearly with the ancients as a Platonist.

In "The Character of Socrates," young Emerson equates the ancient degradation of philosophy by the Sophists with the modern degradation of philosophy by the Enlighteners. He argues that in modern times the true nature of philosophy has gotten lost or confused, as it did with the Sophists, because of modern science and the belief in the uncontrolled progress of human improvement (TUP 3-4). Like the cities the Sophists infested, modern nations prefer making money and acquiring property to developing the mind (TUP 7-8). The Sophists appealed to the acquisitive, not the inquisitive. They degraded philosophy by teaching the children of the opulent for pay and debauched virtue with their Asiatic vices of luxury and depravity (TUP 9-10). Emerson makes it clear that the values of the Enlightenment differ hardly at all from those of the Sophists.

Young Emerson contrasts this ancient and modern decadence with the Attic austerity of the philosopher Socrates. Socrates' teachings, he writes, were "virtuous." (A scholar or a philologist ought to be made curious by young Emerson's use of this term "virtuous" [*virtus*: manly]. If he uses it in its technical, philosophical, and traditional senses, we should not imagine that Emerson intends anything colloquial, idiomatic, or commonplace by the term. If he uses this term in its philosophical sense, then he could not have chosen it accidentally, and we are obliged to assume that young Emerson was not only acquainted with the manifold technical and philosophical senses of the term but that he was capable of thinking in those senses and intended his use of the term to imply those connotations. If Socrates' teachings were "virtuous," they were manly, brave, courageous, valiant, heroic, and capable. More than this, though, "virtue" indicates a power or operative influence in a supernatural being that can produce miracles. Thus, a "virtuous" teaching produces, or is capable of producing, great, and perhaps superhuman, effects, is capable of powerful influence, and perhaps has potent medicinal properties. To be "virtuous" also implies that one is endowed with, or possessed by, either natural power or by a dæmonic, magical, occult, or supernatural power. To be "virtuous" also implies that one's conduct is virtuous, that one lives according to custom and the law, modestly.)

Socrates, Emerson writes, taught fortitude, temperance, and prudence (TUP 19). He was a pagan, a man without revelation; yet, young Emerson writes, he is the model of moral perfection, for he is earth bound and does not seek transcendence or seek meaning outside actually existing conditions (5). He was a patriot, and he sought to reform the abuses of morals and virtues that were causing a national calamity. He witnessed, Emerson writes, greatness of arms and arts, fearlessness, confidence, and independence

of character in his political community degenerate into defeat and factions (TUP 34-5). Embarrassed by the abyss of moral degradation, Socrates, young Emerson writes, desired to restore his fellow citizens' virtue. He would not do this as the Sophists did. He would not "treacherously descend to flatter them," yet his stratagems were sure (TUP 23-4).

Having mastered his own mind and character, Socrates, young Emerson notes, was able by "the power of his art" to grasp the minds of others and mould them to his will. He could unite and direct the wandering energies of the human soul, but especially youth (TUP 16, 25). For young Emerson, Socrates' philosophical art is a politic one. Though accused of infidelity, Socrates taught (at least the show of) piety to youth, advising them to respect and venerate the gods who formed the universe according to their will (TUP 26-27). While Socrates attempted "to form an accomplished pagan" (TUP 28), one whose virtue is natural, he instructed others towards piety both as a means of protection and to have political effect as a teacher of youth. Though Socrates was a man without revelation, a god—or a *dæmon*—accompanied him. Young Emerson says the voice of Socrates' *dæmon* is akin to the inspiration of the prophets to whom God revealed his teachings. However, Emerson calls Socrates' speaking of his *dæmon* an artifice, for Socrates knows if he claims his instructions arrive from higher agents, he is more likely to be create obedience to his teachings (TUP 29-30). In order to have political effect, therefore, Socrates felt "free to promulgate useful falsehood" (TUP 31).

The ideas smuggled into Emerson's tale of Socrates versus the Sophists has clear implications for his own thinking about his relation to his times and to his regime. Like Socrates, Emerson is concerned with virtue and the virtuous and feels the "progress" of the pecuniary arts and the rhetoric of democracy has degraded his community, yet more

importantly, in this essay, we see the young Emerson establish his method of philosophizing. From Plato's Socrates, he learns that it is both useful and necessary to pay lip service to God or the gods and to drape a cloak of inspiration around one's teachings in order for those teachings to circulate and have effect. He is aware, however, that the philosopher is always in danger, that persecution is always possible, and that promulgating a novel teaching, even if it is disguised in traditional garb, is a difficult task. Young Emerson warns himself:

When old prejudices which man entertains of his Maker are fixed; when he is reasoning himself into a consent to the laws of God which govern him; when he has incorporated the names and attributes of those who know and make his destiny with all his views of existence;—be this religion bad or good, be its tendency what it may, till he is convinced of its error he will repel with indignation the power that came to rend and shatter the whole constitution of his soul. (TUP 37-38)

Emerson dedicates himself to the task of rending and shattering, of teaching contempt for modern teachings, and of restoring the morale and dignity of his regime. He notes that could Athens have expelled the Sophists and corrupters, she might have flourished and triumphed till this day as a commonwealth of philosophers. Athens could have maintained its course, looking with enviable unconcern on revolutions that agitated and swallowed up other nations. "The pleasure which such a vision affords," Emerson sighs.

In "The Present State of Ethical Philosophy," Emerson again asserts the superiority of what is ancient over what is modern. Emerson notes that the ancients considered things holistically: logic and metaphysics, poetry and divine revelations, physics and faith were not parceled into separate professions. According to great religious faith, they took the world and nature as they found them. They believed these were uncreated and would remain eternally the same. An inscrutable Fate overruled their

destinies; “an awful, unrevealing silence” prevailed over nature (TUP 44-45). They placed their faith in demigods, the mysteries of Eleusis, and natural magic. They sought high and adventurous ends. These ends and this understanding of nature have been corrupted and perverted in modern times. Modern ends are low and nature is merely material for science, “subservient to great relations we seek and pant after.” Such moderns are “fain to believe the voice of long descended tradition” or to await “the return of the departed gods” (TUP 46).

Young Emerson notes that before Socrates, the laws were locked up in costly manuscripts, remote from the public. Socrates went into the public square and communicated not “a hieroglyphic scripture to amuse the learned and awe the ignorant” but a new law whose practical rules of life were grounded on a singular principle: that the just is the virtuous and the virtuous is the lawful (TUP 48-9). Though Socrates taught in public, Emerson says, he only truly “unfolded his system” to “the inquisitive.” The teachings of Aristotle, young Emerson writes, were also based on the idea that the just was the virtuous, and the virtuous was the lawful. Emerson says Aristotle pursued different moral ends than moderns and that his method of philosophizing, with its unexpected trains of ideas, apparently unconnected philosophical associations, and its tedious ascertaining of definitions and drawing of boundary lines differed as well (TUP 50). Speaking of the triumph of Baconian science over Aristotelian science in the 17th century, Emerson writes, “multitudes united to accelerate his fall.” However, Emerson, a careful reader of Bacon, even as a college student argues that those who thought they understood Bacon’s philosophical or political intentions did not. He writes of those who overturned Socratic philosophy and Aristotelian science that served to support the throne

and altar: the “indignation of the zealots against [Aristotle’s] errors went beyond bounds” and served to “abolish his empire in those departments where it deserved to remain entire.” “Such violent zeal,” Emerson prophesizes, “will probably create a reaction at some future period” (TUP 49).

In his survey of ethical philosophers, young Emerson traces the ancient line of Socrates and Aristotle through the Stoics, Zeno, Epictetus, Cicero, and notes that “with Seneca and Marcus Antoninus closes the line of ancient moralists, and with them the chief praise of human ingenuity and wisdom” (51). Then the age of “unassisted philosophy” came to a close (52). Young Emerson reads the ascendancy of Christianity as a great falling off from the wisdom of the ancient modes and orders.⁴ While the notions of a created universe and of revelation offered “new motives and sanctions,” the founders of Christianity and the Church could not settle the contradictions between reason and revelation. The history of the Christian West is, Emerson asserts, a history of wars between nations and between the Church and the Crown because the Church chose darkness instead of light, faith over virtue (54). The only possible escape from this Christian darkness, Emerson writes, comes from philosophers, but modern philosophers are of no help. Picking on Hobbes, Emerson says his fanatical philosophy that portrays society as based in savageness and stupidity is one of the “accursed fruits” reaped in France. Hobbes “sweeps away all the duties which we owe others” and show all relations

⁴ In his lecture on “Manners,” from the “Philosophy of History” series (1836), Emerson says that the Greeks enjoyed a perfectly natural state of society: there was perfection of bodily nature, of the senses, and of spiritual nature. The Christian era, however, is the reverse of this, for in it, spiritual nature manifests itself as subjugation of the body (EL 2:133). He connects Christianity with the age of trade, noting that Greek manners disappear when the majority competes for property and power with the few. With this general leveling, heroic manners cannot survive (EL 2:142).

are artificial. Despite Edmund Burke's eloquence and Adam Smith's cataloging of the moral sentiment, the young Emerson sees nothing but a perpetual decline in modern politics, philosophy, and morality in which fear of violent death is the only thing holding societies together (TUP 52-58).

Though he lives in a time when the ideology of "progress" prevails—"Few men, probably, feel any inclination to perform the experiment of weakening the magnet; all prefer to see its power accumulating" (TUP 57)—Emerson prefers the ancients' view to the moderns' view of things, especially the enlightened view of humanity as free agents and little more than appetites, desires, and affections. He prefers a language of nature, virtue, and duties instead of the language of the rights of man, persons and property, or of the greatest possible happiness to the greatest number (TUP 62). The leveling principle of utilitarian modern democracy, he says, voids all distinctions of intellect and the pride of erudition. Genius has been taken down from the thrones of angels, and, Emerson announces, anticipating Nietzsche, the scales that measure greatness have been reversed. In modern morality, humble efforts are more meritorious than "solitary miracles of virtue," and penitent suffering is better than heroic sacrifice. With Hume, even causality disappears and the laws of virtue become but idle dreams and fantasies. Modern philosophy, Emerson argues, thinks according to the lowest common denominator, not what is greatest in man. It would be more philosophical (Socratic) and manly (virtuous), Emerson argues (revealing his undergraduate reading of Montaigne⁵), "to ascribe to human short-sightedness its own necessary defects, for the end of all human inquiry is confessedly ignorance" (TUP 65).

⁵ Charles Lowell Young notes that references to Montaigne began in appearing in Emerson's journals by 1821 (1).

Emerson steps into the Counter-Enlightenment current when he contends that the present state of ethics falls far short of the possibilities for human improvement that the ancients understood (TUP 69). Rapid development of powers, or "progress," has been mistaken for "accession to light," and an enlightened calculative ethic is "everywhere disseminated" (TUP 72). He is disgusted by the popularization of scientific knowledge. He frowns at the American ideological belief that the middle and lower ranks, who have lost a tradition of virtue, have the right to discuss great questions of morality or discuss the occurrences of the day and debate the prudence and folly of politicians. "Anciently, such views were confined to small circles of philosophers" and few thought of these things outside the schools; now they are connected with the domestic arrangements of every household (TUP 73).⁶ The many see this as progress, but for Emerson this diffusion of democracy abandons the concept of truth, tradition, custom, and the tenets of

⁶ He does not lose this disgust. In his lecture on "The Present Age," from the "Philosophy of History" series (1836), he discusses how in the age of trade there is an immense creation of property, an increase in the political importance of individuals, and steady progress of the democratic element. This "freedom," he says, improves physical existence, but this pursuit of things of the senses becomes "the good" and "obscures the claims of worthier objects of living," making everyone unscrupulous (EL 2:160-61). When people are congregated in mass, the asperities of individual character are ground off, and people become slaves to fashion and the ambitions of capital. All badges of distinction disappear; the orders of nobility are abolished. The age forces every man, he says, to respect the opinion of multitudes where once it was sufficient to consult the few. While there is a lot of talk, it is talk about nothing: "It is the age of parenthesis; you might put most that we say in brackets and it would not be missed" (EL 2:163). There is a diffusion, not a concentration of knowledge in this Enlightened age: "what is gained in surface is lost in depth" (EL 2:164). In the "dark ages," he says, erudition was revered and men were walking libraries "who never knew what it was to forget" (EL 2:166). Now that all people are educated, many read but what they read is superficial. He calls it an age of facts, not principles, an age that has lost a sense of "something greater" to command reverence and urge heroism and the development of the faculties. In this age, there is no reverence for the mysterious or the obscure, for the church or the state. While this is called "freedom," Emerson states, "We pay a great price for this freedom" (EL 2:169). He says young men are "shipwrecked" at an early age for "want of object in life" (EL 2:170).

faith, for “it settles the foundations of the science to be in the opinions of men” (TUP 74). This, for Emerson, is a kind of relativism or vulgar nihilism, and once this democratized philosophy was disseminated to the many, no state or institution maintained by custom or cultivation was safe. Such vulgar nihilism, however, might serve to awaken the few to the necessity of revaluing the highest values, and, one suspects, it can serve the ends of the kind of philosophy Emerson, and later Nietzsche, is interested in, for a true nihilism tempts those who long to push what is already falling.⁷

Emerson mourns the denigration of ancient political philosophy and the influence on the masses of the birth of secular modern political science. With the decline of the Roman Church, the lower orders of Europe had no power equivalent to the “Indian Brahmin to tell them that in the eternal rounds of transmigration their souls could never rise above the jackal; and the license which the press immediately created tended directly to enlighten and emancipate them” (TUP 74). Emerson says Machiavelli’s *The Prince* “could not fail to open their eyes to the bondage under which they groaned” (TUP 74). Progress meant the demolition of the feudal system, the rise of the commons in Europe, and the science of political representation that created either actual rebellions against the throne or symptoms of impending revolutions. To the statesman, Emerson says, these things were “portending tremendous events about to ensue,” but to the moralist these commotions were the inevitable effect of the general dissemination of knowledge that might have been foreseen from the moment of Guttenberg’s invention of the printing press. These events, Emerson says, “must proceed with whatever disastrous effects to the

⁷ In his lecture on “Religion,” from the “Philosophy of History” series (1836), Emerson writes, “Unbelief never lasts long. It always proceeds out of deepest Belief . . . Already society sickens of skepticism, and new communities of faith form” (EL 2:97).

calm and secure possession of equal rights and laws which it was intended to obtain” (TUP 75-76).

The ends of progress, however, are finally the arrogant, sophistic ends of an overreaching ambition. Emerson writes, “We are prone to indulge ideas of perfectibility of human nature when we anticipate the condition of future ages, and attempt to form estimates of their moral greatness.” However, “In contemplating a science whose very object is to perfect the nature of man, imagination oversteps unconsciously the limit, to depict miraculous excellence which poetry promises and philosophy desires but dares not expect” (TUP 76). Emerson has no faith in the “pandects” of civilized nations. He would prefer “one eternal policy of moral rectitude” for “the thousand capricious policies which dictate the conduct of states.” The American government, with its liberal notions is tending toward the termination of ethics, thinking ethics merely an “elementary recollection, and useless any further” (TUP 78). To become a fervent scholar of moral political philosophy is to learn its objects and tendencies. It is to know that virtue ought to rule the world and that “the departure from this law is the decay of human glory.” What is required is the right distance to survey the whole history of legislation, the right perspective and knowledge of ethical truth to judge “the good or bad spirit of laws” (79).⁸

⁸ Strauss writes, “All political action aims at either preservation or change. When desiring to preserve, we wish to prevent a change to the worse; when desiring to change, we wish to bring about something better. All political action is then guided by some thought of better or worse. But thought of better or worse implies thought of the good. The awareness of the good which guides all our action has the character of opinion: it is no longer questioned but, on reflection, it proves to be questionable. The very fact that we can question it directs us towards such a thought of the good as is no longer questionable—towards a thought which is no longer opinion but knowledge. All political action has then in itself a directedness towards knowledge of the good: of the good life, or the good society. For the good society is the complete political good” (WPP 10).

Education in Eloquence

We know that we are candidates for influences more subtle & more high than those of talent & ambition. We want a leader, a friend, whom we have not yet seen.

—Emerson (TN 1:253)

We want the will which advances and dictates.

—Emerson, "Courage" (W 7:245)

Coarse selfishness, fraud and conspiracy; and most of the great results of history are brought about by discreditable means.

—Emerson, "Considerations by the Way" (W 8:248)

While a student at Harvard, Emerson studied rhetoric with Edward T. Channing.⁹

Besides Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell, Henry David Thoreau, Charles Eliot Norton, and other major and minor figures of the New England Renaissance received Channing's rhetorical instruction from 1819 to 1851. Channing delivered lectures to upperclassmen, but primarily he instructed students privately. It has been suggested that Channing "caused" the American Renaissance, but one doubts Channing would make so bold a claim. In his lecture "A Writer's Preparation" he notes,

No modest teacher would claim to have made his pupil a good writer; and no prudent one, even if he believed in his so great success, would undertake to say how it was effected. The young man himself could not explain the process by the most severe inquiry into the growth of his mind, and of the now fully developed power of execution. (185)

That Emerson is silent in his texts concerning his old writing teacher perhaps proves Channing's point. While Channing also says there is "no occult method of obtaining mastery of language" (238), a reading of Channing's "The Orator and His Times" might clarify his student Emerson's theory and practice of eloquence.

⁹ For an excellent study of Emerson and the New England religious and class influences on his rhetoric, see Broadus.

Channing first delivered "The Orator and His Times" at Harvard when he assumed the office of Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory (1819). The problem Channing sets forth in his inaugural lecture is this: since an orator is "the creature of the circumstances in which he is placed" (14), any attempt to teach and practice oratory or eloquence, or institute a revival of eloquence, must first take into account the state of society (1). In ancient states, eloquence was "the favorite and necessary accomplishment of all who were ambitious of rising in the world" (2). A noble child was educated in it since the state and the tastes, wants, and habits of the people "all invited him to fit himself for command in the senate, the public meetings, the courts of justice, and even the field of war, by the vast preparations of a perfect orator" (2). This education aimed not to make him a sophist but a good general, for, as Channing writes, he must be constantly armed "for the fight of eloquence" as "a man-at-arms in the war of pleaders," and he must study "the temper of his countrymen to know how to manage them . . . direct their counsels, share their pride, and even take advantage of their frailties" (2-3).¹⁰

Ancient orators formed the minds, moved the passions, and directed the opinions of their audiences—that "inflammable population" with strong national feelings who, though often ignorant, had no rights, privileges, or enjoyments they were not willing to risk for the chances of an aggrandizing war. Citizens gathered to hear men of eloquence

¹⁰ In "Heroism," Emerson connects education to the "military attitude of the soul." Education "must not omit the arming of the man," and must serve to remind the student "that he is born into the state of war." Emerson's student must train to be a general: "The commonwealth and his own well-being require that he should not go dancing in the weeds of peace, but warned, self-collected and neither defying nor dreading the thunder, let him take both reputation and life in his hand, and with perfect urbanity dare the gibbet and the mob by the absolute truth of his speech and the rectitude of his behavior. Towards all this external evil the man within the breast assumes a warlike attitude, and affirms his ability to cope single-handed with the infinite army of enemies" (W 2:235).

and lend their voices to decisions on questions concerning the glory or safety of the state (3-7). The decisions made did not, as in modern societies, rely on precedents or "absolute, written laws." Orators could go beyond the law and gain glory and power should their eloquence serve to "swell the empire, multiply its resources, crowd the streets with trophies and captives, and make the world itself the prison-house of one master" (6-7). The unsettled state of society the orator found himself in was "a combination for extending power, rather than for establishing a prosperous security" (8). If there were evils inside the state that needed reform, "the orator could draw the attention of the discontented to some foreign enterprise, or fix it upon a victim at home," or "tempt the rabble to waste their irritation" on something else (8).

Under ancient political conditions, Channing contends, oratory was not, as in modern times, merely a splendid accomplishment nor was rhetoric a venerated form of literature. Rhetoric and oratory were important weapons in the hands of virtuous and aspiring citizens, not schoolbooks to provide lessons in speaking (9-11). The spirit of the modern age tends to make everything practical and useful, Channing writes, but "the object of eloquence is always the same,—to bring men, by whatever modes of address, to our way of thinking, and thus make them act according to our wishes" (11-13). However, the modern orator finds himself in a much different state than his ancient counterpart. Among the "improvements of the age," Channing lists a stable government, the diffusion of knowledge, and a spirit of inquiry. Such a state does not offer a role for an orator who aims to produce "the strongest possible excitement" (9). In ancient warlike states, Channing notes, we are constantly struck by "the controlling influence of a few leading men, who appear to produce every change, however tremendous, by some vast and

unexpected efforts, either of headlong violence or hidden contrivance" (14-15). This is not obvious, or is unthinkable, in the present age, which lessens the power of individuals: "we do not encourage any man to aspire after an overwhelming greatness or sway" (14).

Witnessing a shift in his country from republicanism to liberalism,¹¹ Channing knew that the rhetorical circumstances for political eloquence were changing. American citizens could not gather in the *agora* to hash out the issues. There was, however, a popular, if often partisan, press to spread ideas quickly and indiscriminately. In an age without great men, where youth are told the nation does not "need great men now to take the place of laws and institutions, but merely to stand by them and see that they are unobstructed and unimpaired," where "A great man is perpetually taught now that the world can do without him" (15), any "judicious attempt" to improve the art of eloquence must account for these social and political changes (13). For Channing, progressive social changes are neither necessary nor permanent. Eloquence, if practiced prudently, could still produce effects and create new modes and orders, or perhaps recreate old modes and orders anew.

"If the ancient oratory were in demand now," Channing writes, "it would awake from the sleep of two thousand years without the aid of the rhetorician" (13). Disguising by understatement, perhaps, his own political commitment to the revival not only of rhetoric but also of a state where rhetoric is central, he writes:

It is perfectly visionary to suppose, as some have done, that a few great men, by taking advantage of public enthusiasm, during the stormy periods of a free government, might effect an entire revolution in eloquence, and revive it in its ancient spirit and power. Such a revolution might be forwarded by their skilful exertions, but it could only be wrought by those secret and slowly operating

¹¹ See Charles Paine, *The Resistant Writer*, for more on Channing's rhetoric as a response to social conditions.

causes which change entirely the face of society, the character and, in some degree, the occupations of a whole people. (14)

No matter how things might appear to the present age with its Hobbesian/Lockean ideology of security, laws, and capitalist institutions, Channing argues, there still exists the potential for revolutions, tumults, and military preparations, which have always been excited and directed by the few (15). This “improved state of society,” Channing notes, “is not unfavorable to passion or imagination, whenever the subject and occasion deserve it and are suited to awaken it” (20).

This new state of individuals, more contemplative and solitary, more refined and luxurious, he notes in his lecture “Demonstrative Oratory,” can perhaps even “call forth and establish a class of what might be called literary orators . . . whose vocation it will be to investigate literary, moral, and scientific subjects, or the elegant arts, and make them familiar and agreeable to multitudes in public discourses” (65). Such cultivation of the people in written texts and public lectures, such those Emerson produced, could slowly, depending on *fortuna*, teach men to “think patiently and earnestly” (19). Though the effects of eloquence may not be obvious in a modern state, this does not mean, Channing hints, that the few are not still working behind the scenes and between the lines to create a new community and a new state to pursue ancient ends.

Proleptic Eloquence

There are people who can never understand a trope or any second or expanded sense given to your words, or any humor; but remain literalists, after hearing the music and poetry and rhetoric and wit of seventy or eighty years. They are past the help of surgeon or clergy. But even these can understand pitchforks and the cry of Fire! and I have noticed in some of this class a marked dislike of earthquakes.

—Emerson, “Culture” (W 6:135)

I gain my point, I gain all points, if I can reach my companion with any statement which teaches him his own worth.

—Emerson, “Success” (W 7:277)

In his notebook “RT: Rhetoric,” Emerson writes: “*Nobil vulgar eloquenza*,” which he translates as, “Speak with the vulgar, think with the wise,” and he confesses, “We can do nothing without the shadow” (TN 2:147, 151). In his notebook, “XO: Reality and Illusion,” and again in “Aristocracy” (W 10:37), Emerson platonizes,

The terrible aristocracy that is in nature! real people dwelling with the real, face to face, undaunted;—then, far down, people of taste, people dwelling in a relation, or rumor, or influence, of good & fair,—entertained by it, superficially touched, yet charmed by these shadows;—and, far below these, the gross & thoughtless, the animal men, billows of chaos. (TN 1:251)

In the essay “Eloquence,” from *Society and Solitude*,¹² Emerson observes, “we boil at different degrees” (W 7:63). For those with “a two-inch enthusiasm” whose waters are not very deep, the excitement of conversation is all that is necessary. Others need “a multitude and a public debate,” “an antagonist, or a hot indignation,” “a revolution,” or “nothing less than the grandeur of absolute ideas, the splendors and shades of Heaven and Hell” (W 7:63). No matter the boiling point, eloquence stimulates each hearer to his own level, whether that is engaging in debate, discussion, or returning to the fireside, loquacious after having been made “good receivers and conductors.”

While Robert D. Richardson, in his biography *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, considers “Eloquence” an egalitarian and “nonpolitical essay,” since at its beginning Emerson writes that everyone is eloquent at least once in his life (447), to read past the first paragraph is to see it turn toward themes long part of the history of rhetoric and of an

¹² *Society and Solitude* is a miscellany, first published in 1870, but the lecture “Eloquence” was delivered on several occasions between 1847 and the 1850s, and was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1858.

esoteric tradition of political philosophy that assumes the rightness of order of rank (*Rangordnung*) in society. In his notebooks, Emerson writes, "An orator makes his pauses or silences more potent than his words" (TN 2:158), and silence is an important *techne* in "Eloquence." Emerson reveres the wisdom of "phlegmatic brains" who do not "break silence before their time," but he understands the consequences of silence: "Plato says that the punishment which the wise suffer who refuse to take part in government, is, to live under the government of worse men" (W 7:64). Yet the wisest men resist the "lust to speak" or engage directly in public affairs, though many who rashly seek political reforms do not. It is a sign of the times Emerson says, following Thomas Carlyle, this "universal feeling of the energy of the engine, and the curiosity men feel to touch the springs." However, eloquence used prudently can mesmerize an audience, produce effects like "patients taking nitrous-oxide gas," and turn a popular assembly into a musical instrument from which "the most wonderful effects can be drawn" (W 7:64). Emerson insinuates that audiences can be transformed from an aggregate of individuals into a social organism through the effects of eloquence and can become devoted to an eloquent speaker. Echoing a sentiment from his notebooks, Emerson vows to address "the true potentate," "for they are not kings who sit on thrones, but they who know how to govern" (W 7:65; TN 1:229).¹³

Emerson, like Channing, compares ancient and modern eloquence. Antiphon, one of Plutarch's ten orators, said he could "cure distempers of the mind with words."

¹³ In the dedicatory letter to the *Discourses*, Machiavelli does not address those who are princes, "those who would know how to govern states," but "those who by their infinite good qualities are worthy to be such," "those who have the right to govern, but lack the knowledge" (102). Machiavelli intends to give such princes of the future the knowledge necessary to topple those who merely sit on thrones. For a study of Machiavelli's esoteric modes of address, see Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*.

Isocrates described his art as “the power of magnifying what was small and diminishing what was great.” For the Spartans, according to Socrates, the art became a sharp weapon—hurled sentences, short and contorted, made opponents “in no respect superior to a boy.” Emerson, though, prefers the definitions of rhetoric he finds in Plato and the *Koran*. For Plato it is “the art of ruling the minds of men,” and in the *Koran*, the end of eloquence is to alter, in a pair of hours if not a half-hour, the convictions and habits of years.¹⁴ Eloquence is seductive, and young men, says Emerson, are “eager to enjoy this sense of added power” (W 7:66). This power begets responsibilities and dangers of misuse or sophistic abuse, for eloquence is not skilful storytelling, legal or logical arguing, or addressing an audience’s prejudices. Instead, it ought to take “sovereign possession of the audience” (W 7:66-67).

The orator as “artist” plays an assembly of men like a maestro plays a piano. Mixed into Emerson’s proto-Nietzschean theories of “the artist” are some things that might disturb Emerson’s “democratic” readers. That they usually pass over Emerson’s ideas whose political implications are uncertain testifies to Emerson’s mastery of esoteric eloquence. As he writes in “Experience,” “A man will not be observed in doing that which he can do best. There is a certain magic about his properest action which stupefies your powers of observation, so that though it is done before you, you wist not of it” (W 3:70). In Emerson’s encomium of rhetoric—softening the furious, bringing the audience to laughter or tears, etc.—he discusses how an artist composes and draws his audience. The nature of a crowd or its individuals before exposure to “the art” is of little

¹⁴ Emerson repeats this in “The Scholar”: “This is the secret of eloquence, for it is the end of eloquence in a half-hour’s discourse,— perhaps by few sentences,—to persuade a multitude of persons to renounce their opinions, and change the course of life. They go forth not the men they came in, but shriven, convicted, and converted” (W 10:268).

consequence since the artist can get them to “carry and execute that which he bids”

through “the power of [his] gravitation” (W 7:67). This effect is rare and mysterious:

This is a power of many degrees and requiring in the orator a great range of faculty and experience, requiring a large, composite man, such as Nature rarely organizes; so that in our experience we are forced to gather up the figure in fragments, here one talent and there another. (W 7:67)

Nature, or fate, rarely organizes the coincidence of politics and philosophy in a perfect prince or a best regime; therefore, political philosophers must gather up the fragments in order to advance, however slowly and patiently, their agenda. Part of the process of gathering these fragments (of souls, ideas, books, representative men) is learning what and how to read and ranking those one teaches according to their talents and inclinations. It demands, in current neoconservative parlance, a pedagogy of Great Books.

This gathering can also take place for Emerson, the renowned public lecturer, in oratory. Emerson knows there are “many audiences in every public assembly” and that individuals themselves are composed of different ranks of consciousness. The artful speaker knows immediately how to determine their order of rank, how to speak to each, and how to be silent to most. Saying anything comic or coarse causes the “emergence” of “the boys and rowdies.” Topics “graver and higher” cause the “roisters” to recede and a “chaste and wise attention” to arise. With “noble sentiment[s], the attention deepens, [and] a new and highest audience now listens.” As Emerson points out, in every audience, as in every person, there is a “capacity of virtue.” Even “humble persons,” such as one of Emerson’s favorite mystics Böhme, can receive this “new illumination,” and with it their “narrow brows expand with enlarged affections” (W 7:67-68).

Aristotle held that we are born with “potential intellects” and Plato that we are born with a dæmon buoying about our heads. Eloquence, for Emerson, is what actualizes

the intellect and allows us to hear the voice of our *dæmon*. It can unveil “delicate spirits long unknown to themselves, masked and muffled in coarsest fortunes,” and help the modern few “hear their own native language for the first time” (W 7:68). A good orator must have “a certain robust and radiant physical health” and “great volumes of animal heat” (W 7:69) to attract fascination—to steal the hearer’s feet, control his memory, and organize his thoughts (W 7:71). However, the magic of eloquence, Emerson realizes, “often exists without higher merits” (W 7:74): friend and foe, sales clerk and hero, sophist and philosopher, ancient and modern alike can use it. Emerson, however, is interested in “the magic of personal ascendancy” (W 7:77).

This magic seems a kind of political messianism and is expressed in the language of a desirous waiting for the arrival that one who will set the world aright. Emerson imagines this figure with a “a rich coincidence of powers, intellect, will, sympathy, organs, and, over all, good fortune in the cause.” His tone turns, by degrees, devotional:

We have a half-belief that the person is possible who can counterpoise all other persons. We believe that there may be a man who is a match for events, one who never found his match, against whom other men being dashed are broken,—one of inexhaustible personal resources, who can give you any odds and beat you. What we really wish for is a mind equal to any exigency. (W 7:77)

The *polymetis* Odysseus is the model. Through his stratagems he could infuse “reason into men disabled by terror,” placate thieves, mobs, and cannibals, and turn highwayman into loyal servants. Emerson strategically turns Machiavellian, noting that if done with confidence, power, and eloquence, no action retains a bad name. The eloquent potential sovereign “might head any party, unseat any sovereign, and abrogate any constitution in Europe and America” (W 7:78). One who is to found new modes and orders is one who has “at one step attained vast power, who has renounced his moral sentiment, and settled

it with himself that he will no longer stick at anything" (W 7:78). Such a one "cannot be disconcerted, and so can never play his last card, but has a reserve of power when he has hit his mark" (W 7:79). Emerson goes even further, and while many of his readers read his exuberance as poetic enthusiasm, I suggest Emerson's intentions are anything but poetic in passages like this: "With a serene face, he subverts a kingdom. What is told of him is miraculous; it affects men so. The confidence of men in him is lavish, and he changes the face of the world, and histories, poems, and new philosophies arise to account for him" (W 7:79).¹⁵ In such a prince, "the power of Nature run[s] without impediment from the brain and will into the hands."

Stanley Cavell connects Emerson and Heidegger (via Nietzsche) where each, using images of clutching or grasping, compares thinking to "handicraft."¹⁶ Grasping beforehand or anticipation, in rhetoric, is called "prolepsis." Emerson uses this figure in

¹⁵ In "Why I Am a Destiny," Nietzsche writes, "I know my fate. One day my name will be associated with the memory of something tremendous—a crisis without equal on earth, the most profound collision of conscience, a decision that was conjured up *against* everything that had been believed, demanded, hallowed so far. I am no man, I am dynamite" (*Ecce* 326). Nietzsche prophesizes that he will bring *great politics* and "wars the like of which have never been yet seen on earth" (*Ecce* 327).

¹⁶ What Cavell misses by making claims about Emerson based on very few essays is how the notion of the hand is connected with a particular kind of thinking and a particular "thinker." In *Society and Solitude*, Napoleon is the "handiest" thinker. Despite Emerson's reservations about Napoleon's politics in *Representative Men* (and scattered throughout his corpus), Emerson admires Napoleon's skills as a general, his stratagems, and his ability to create new modes and orders. (This is similar to Emerson's appreciation of Martin Luther.) In "Works and Days," Emerson quotes Napoleon: "A general always has troops enough, if he only knows how to employ those he has, and bivouacs them" (W 7:169). In "Courage," he notes that courage is a "good contagion" and has a "magnetic affinity." The "best courages" have all the elements of a good stratagem: "inventions, inspirations, flashes of genius." Napoleon seems to Emerson to be one capable of *mechanemata*, of making discoveries (which are, in part, gifts of the gods) through which human culture is advanced, because he connects Napoleon to "a certain prophetic instinct, better than wisdom." He quotes Napoleon again: "My hand is immediately connected with my head" (W 7:256-57). This quoting continues in "Success:" "There is nothing in war which I cannot do by my own hands" (W 7:268).

“Social Aims” where he asserts Mahomet “borrowed by anticipation” ideas from Swedenborg (W 8:96). For political philosophy, prolepsis is closer to prophecy, a speaking of uncertain future events as if they had already arrived. As Geoff Waite writes in *Nietzsche’s Corps/e*, “Prophecy entails prolepsis.” Prolepsis is used “to propel the imagination of the reader—or listener or viewer—into a future from which the initial ‘prophecy’ can be affirmed or rejected” (131). “Prolepsis,” Waite writes, “is a way of consciously, shrewdly anticipating and manipulating unconscious phenomena, making prophecy serve particular aesthetic and political ends” (131). It is “an illocutionary way of representing future acts or developments as being always already *almost* present, a way of taking beforehand, of preempting possible objections and oppositions to weaken their perlocutionary force” (131-32). Prolepsis does not merely anticipate; it produces a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy that, perhaps dæmonically, guides (as a *hegemonikón*) and navigates certain fragments of souls (*apospasma*).¹⁷ For Waite, proleptic guiding and navigating produces political effects. Translated into German political theory it becomes the *Führerprinzip* (the “Leader-Principle”) (134). Translated into Emersonian it becomes, perhaps, the principle of Representative Men who guide philosophy and

¹⁷ The Stoics believed dæmons were the souls of dead heroes or wise men that mediated between the higher realms and the lower to help potential heroes and wise men with their tasks or to guide them (as *hegemonikón*). Others believed dæmons were interpreters between these regions, or was another intellect, less than divine but above ours that “irradiates our human souls and perfects them” (Philoponus 44:25-38). Emerson is likely to have learned much of this from Iamblichus’ survey of the Egyptian, Chaldaen, and Assyrian mysteries. Among the many passages marked in Emerson’s copy of Iamblichus is, “The operations of dæmons appear to be more rapid than they are in reality” (89). For Emerson, this slow revealing can evidence itself in many ways, but the incremental emanations he seems most to seek arrive from “the books, their ghosts.” Books and their spectral authors are “Janus-faced” friends that cause us to look to the wisdom of the ancients and to the future (W 2:205, 206).

politics through their chirography, their eloquent speech, and their lives. Prolepsis is also, as Waite notes, a “mode of *military strategy*” (135).

In his essay “Clubs,” Emerson asks, “What can you do with an eloquent man?”

No rules of debate, no contempt of court, no exclusions, no gag-laws can be contrived that his first syllable will not set aside or overstep and annul. You can shut out the light, it may be, but can you shut out gravitation? You may condemn his book, but can you fight against his thought? That is always too nimble for you, anticipates you, and breaks out victorious in some other quarter. (W 7:226-27)

Prolepsis is part of the arsenal of eloquence, one of its stratagems. With it, one has the force, in Plato’s terms, to turn (*periagoge*) opponents into friends.

Cavell maintains that Emerson, despite his perfectionism, elitism, and stress on educating “youth,” is a champion of a (Derridean) democracy to come, even where the literalness of Emerson’s texts “sounds bad” (*Conditions* 49). He notes “the provisionality of [Emerson’s] writing—envisioning its adoption, awaiting its appropriation in certain ways (it cannot *make* this happen, work as it may)” (42). He points to Emerson’s seeming hatred of moralism and conformity, his open disdain for the mediocrity and leveling impulses of cultural institutions like churches and schools, and his only occasionally veiled disgust with the present state of things (46, 48, 56).¹⁸ However, Cavell continues to use the term “democracy” without stating (or realizing?) that Emerson’s “democracy” is the democracy of the ancients and the Platonists, of rank ordering, not the democracy of good Enlightenment, capitalist liberals or socialist

¹⁸ In “Success,” Emerson writes, “I hate this shallow Americanism which hopes to get rich by credit, to get knowledge by raps on midnight tables, to learn the economy of mind by phrenology, or skill without study, or mastery without apprenticeship, or the sale of goods through pretending that they sell, or power through making believe you are powerful, or through a packed jury or caucus, bribery and ‘repeating’ votes, or wealth by fraud” (W 7:273-74).

progressives. Cavell may have the best of intentions, but his Emerson sounds closer to Nietzsche who wants to push nihilism-as-Enlightenment to its logical conclusions where everything becomes equal in value, where therefore nothing has any ultimate value, and where a master race can rise up and give new meaning and value to things. Cavell writes that these “undeniably aristocratic or aesthetic perfectionisms” should “be taken as part of the training for democracy” (56).

This proleptic power to charm, Emerson writes in “Civilization,” borrows from “the might of the elements”: “Ideas are impregnable” and “bestow on the hero their invincibility” (W 7:32-33). In “Art,” however, Emerson qualifies this: Nature is more omnipotent than ideas. Nature’s law is that “Art must be a complement to nature, strictly subsidiary” (W 7:44). “Nature tyrannizes over our works,” Emerson writes; “They must be conformed to her law, or they will be ground to powder by her omnipresent activity.” The law of Nature, as Emerson repeats, is that right belongs to the stronger. When a genius writes, “His works become as it were hers, and he is no longer free. But if we work within this limit, she yields us all her strength” (W 7:45-46). In the genius’s handiwork, the force of gravity and the weight of the planet replace muscular force. But even less-than-great minds can wield pens and write thoughts to inspire us, for as forces of Nature, though they “did not foresee and design all the effects they produce on us,” they can achieve “happy hits” (W 7:50). To produce a work that will be admired for all time, the artist must “disindividualize himself” becoming “one through whom the soul of all men circulates as the common air through his lungs” (W 7:51). He must be like a prophet or angel who does not speak his own words but is “an organ through which the universal mind acts” (W 7:52).

"Works and Days" continues these themes. "Our nineteenth century is the age of tools," Emerson writes, but "all the tools and engines on earth are only extensions" of human hands, limbs, and senses. Man is "an intelligence served by organs" (W 7:151). The mechanical arts and media that follow them arrogantly promise a future that will "lift human life out of its beggary to a god-like ease and power" (W 7:152). Steam is "the enemy of time and space" (W 7:153). The telegraph, "that extension of the eye and ear," particularly appeals to Emerson (W 7:154). There seems no limits to these inventions, and art and power "will make day out of night, time out of space, and space out of time" (W 7:155). There may even be "new solutions of the embarrassing political problems," but, for now, "Our politics are disgusting," "corrupt and brutal" (W 7:155, 159).

Conservatives, Fascists, and Nazis have often enjoyed the technical improvements of progress but not its politics or its culture. In a world of machines, newspapers, and paper money, Emerson writes, "Man flatters himself that his command over nature must increase," but man is closer to the thirsty Tantalus who thought he could bottle a wave. Such progress does not bring "the new man" from "the brink of chaos," nor change the fact that times are always hard, money always scarce. Nor does it produce "the right sort" of men and women. "We must look deeper for our salvation," he writes, "than to steam, photographs, balloons or astronomy" (W 7:157). The machine "unmakes the man" (W 7:158). Trade, which drew great inventions in its wake, is shameful. The "measure of the worth of man" does not come from "the enumeration of his arts and inventions." Man's character is no better. Morals have declined with the progress of mechanical arts: "Here are great arts and little men. Here is greatness begotten of paltriness" (W 7:159). These works are worthless unless they give us days, for example,

to read Plato's *Timæus* or commune with other great books and great minds: "they take us by the hand, and we share their thought" (W 7:163). These philosophical handiworks are the things that make us rich, not pitiful things like coins, coats, or carpets. In "Clubs," Emerson calls wealth an illusion: "Society seems to have agreed to treat fictions as realities, and realities as fictions," he complains, but he hints: "And does it never occur that we perhaps live with people too superior to be seen,—as there are musical notes too high for the scale of most ears?" (W 7:228). The many "cannot be well cultivated." These are people "whom you must keep down and quiet if you can" (W 7:231).

The world would best be thought of according to "our fine Latin word, with its delicate future tense,—*natura*, *about to be born*, or what German philosophy denotes as a *becoming*" (W 7:164-65), but we too often forget this due to "a force of *illusion*." We are "coaxed, flattered, and duped" by what the "Hindoos" call "Maia," "as if, in this gale of warring elements which life is, it was necessary to bind souls to human life as mariners in a tempest lash themselves to the mast and bulwarks of a ship" (W 7:165). "This element of illusion lends all its force to hide the values of present time," and, Emerson chides, "Ah! poor dupe, will you never slip out of the web of the master juggler?" The events, trade, entertainments, and gossip "all throw dust in the eyes and distract attention" (W 7:166). Despite the sleight-of-hand of progress, history in the deepest sense—the history of the soul—is static: "an everlasting Now reigns in nature." We are merely "repeating the experiences of the people in the streets of Thebes or Byzantium" (W 7:167). The ideology of progress scorns "the deep to-day," and presumes "the present hour is not the critical, decisive hour." "No man has learned anything rightly," Emerson councils, "until he knows that every day is Doomsday" (W 7:167-68).

Emerson teaches the “old secret” that gods come in low disguises, that kings hide their crowns to mix with the populace, that Jesus was born in a barn, and that divinities can be disguised as a “seeming gang of gypsies and pedlers” (W 7:167-68). “Everything in the universe,” he winks, “goes by indirection” (W 7:173). In Enlightened democratic thinkers, Emerson notes, “there is a good deal of skepticism as to extraordinary influence:” “To talk of an overpowering mind rouses the same jealousy and defiance [as] . . . anecdotes of mesmerism.” However, in the scientific dismissal of the mysterious, the discounted thing maintains a spectral power that might affect and perhaps awaken ancient memories. This gives Emerson a glimmer of hope for a revival of eloquence. He asks if anyone supposes “himself to be quite impregnable” to heroic ideas? Is everyone so settled and secure “that not possibly a man may come to him who shall persuade him out of his most settled determination?” or who can “make a fanatic of him” (W 7:81)? Emerson, in his modesty, claims he is not the one to rouse modern man, “But what if one should come of the same turn of mind as his own, and who sees much further on his own way than he?” “A man who has tastes like mine,” Emerson confesses, “but in greater power, will rule me any day, and make me love my ruler” (W 7:81).

An eloquent ruler who can establish new modes and orders conquers in “the rivalry between the orator and the occasion” (W 7:83). In cases of emergency,¹⁹ a great man arises with the proper stratagem and eloquence: “Napoleon’s tactics of marching on the angle of an army, and always presenting a superiority of numbers, is the orator’s secret also” (W 7:84). The one with sovereign eloquence teaches his hearers “to see

¹⁹ This is what Schmitt, “grand jurist for the Third Reich,” refers to as *Ernstfall*, the extreme situation outside the law that demands a sovereign decision, in *The Concept of the Political*. Also see *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*.

things with his eyes" (W 7:88).²⁰ He is generative, spermatic: "His expressions fix themselves in men's memories, and fly from mouth to mouth. His mind has some new principle of order" (W 7:89).²¹ He can electrify audiences,²² and "They feel as if they already possessed some new right and power." "The listener," says Emerson, "cannot hide from himself that something has been shown him and the whole world which he did not wish to see; and he cannot dispose of it, it disposes of him" (W 7:91).

The "democratic" Emerson follows that sentence with this: "The history of public men and affairs in America will readily furnish tragic examples of this fatal force."²³ The tragedy of American democratic eloquence is that it has roused people toward the wrong ends: for equality and utility under the rule of law instead of virtue, rank, and excellence

²⁰ Stanley Rosen argues that Nietzsche's success in transforming political and philosophical discourse is a result of his ability to get us to see through his eyes, to not say "Nietzsche's judgment" but to say "my judgment." Rosen also writes of Nietzsche's politics, "A radically new society requires as its presupposition the destruction of the existing society. . . . The first step in the destruction of the West is not war, and not even armed insurrection, but the initiation of the process of transforming human values" (*Ancients* 190).

²¹ Emerson perhaps draws this notion from Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*, where Bacon draws on the wisdom of Solomon, who noted that there was no end of making books and that reading wearied the flesh. In his address to the King, Bacon notes that learning softens men's minds, making them inept in honorable duties and the use of arms. Though learning and books have led men down many false paths, into vanities, and into corruption, wisdom still finds its best means of conveyance in books, and books, Bacon notes, are "monuments of wit and learning . . . more durable than the monuments of power or of the hands" (73). The verses of Homer persist while countless palaces, temples, and cities have been destroyed. The wisdom contained in books is "capable of perpetual renovation:" "they generate still, and cast their seeds in the minds of others, provoking and causing infinite actions and opinions in succeeding ages" (74).

²² The best study of Emerson's electric rhetoric is Eric Wilson's *Emerson's Sublime Science*. Another extremely good study of Emerson's theories of eloquence is James Perrin Warren's *Culture of Eloquence: Oratory and Reform in Antebellum America*.

²³ For an influential argument about Emerson's democratic rhetoric, see James A. Berlin's *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth Century American Colleges*. Berlin argues that Emerson is "communitarian" in his politics and favors popular self-government, egalitarian ethics, and social justice. Berlin bases his arguments on the same essay by Emerson I am examining here.

under the rule of the wise few, or the one. The eloquent person Emerson desires is one who addresses himself to events and expresses a nation's reason and destiny. He seems dæmonically possessed, and his words represent "the order of Nature itself." His speech is calm in a tumult, and he "never utters a premature syllable, but keeps the secret of its means and method."²⁴ Such a one "stands before the people as a demonical power to whose miracles they have no key" (W 7:92). In this enlightened, democratic age, however, the chance of such a one arriving capable of uniting politics and philosophy through the powers of eloquence is unlikely. "But," Emerson interjects just as Channing does, "the conditions for eloquence always exist" (W 7:94).

The art of eloquence "is always dying out of famous places and appearing in corners:" "Wherever polarities meet,"²⁵ wherever the fresh moral sentiment and the instinct of freedom and duty, come into direct opposition to fossil conservatism and the thirst of gain, the spark will pass" (W 7:94). This eloquent rhetorician, who will wipe away modernity's table of values to make live the ancient virtues and values, prepares himself to teach the perfect prince or the philosophers of the future and "train[s] himself to mastery in this science of persuasion." His education will be of "character and insight," and he will learn that "his speech is not differenced from action" (W 7:95). He looks "on opposition as opportunity. He cannot be defeated or put down. There is a principle of resurrection in him, an immortality of purpose" that is the same for him as it

²⁴ In "The Scholar," Emerson writes, "You will see the drift of all my thoughts, this namely—that the scholar must be much more than a scholar, that his ends give value to every means, but he is to subdue and keep down his methods" (W10:272-73).

²⁵ The primary political polarity for Schmitt, Nietzsche, and other political Platonists is that of the friend and the enemy. Without this polarity (which the Enlightenment — and in its wake global capitalism — threatened to eliminate), there is no politics, and certainly no great politics and wars.

was for the ancients and as it will be for the philosophers to come. If the coincidence of philosophy and politics has not occurred, Emerson suggests, the fault is not with the world or with the people who have not yet been convinced to will their own slavery.²⁶ The fault lies with the failure of eloquence to convert followers, according to Emerson, "into fiery apostles and publishers of the same wisdom" (W 7:96).

Emerson, Nietzsche, Hitler, Strauss, or, Borrowing by Anticipation

All the toys that infatuate men and which they play for,—houses, land, money, luxury, power, fame, are the selfsame thing, with a new gauze or two of illusion overlaid. And all the drums and rattles by which men are made willing to have their heads broke, and are led out solemnly every morning to parade, the most admirable is this by which we are brought to believe that events are arbitrary and independent of actions. At the conjurer's, we detect the hair by which he moves his puppet, but we have not eyes sharp enough to descry the thread that ties cause and effect.

—Emerson, "Fate" (W 6:43-44)

In 1887, Nietzsche, writing about "the strong of the future," notes that throughout history, the stronger type has appeared here and there partly through necessity and partly by chance. Now, he proclaims, we are able "to comprehend and consciously *will*" the production of the stronger type: "we are able to create the conditions under which such an elevation is possible." Modern enlightened education, science, democracy, capitalism, and socialism, following hard upon the history of Christianity, has produced the "dwarfing of man," but this nihilism is "precisely the driving force that brings to mind the breeding of a stronger race" (*Will* § 898). This process elevates the weak above the

²⁶ George Stack writes of Nietzsche, "Intrinsically of the masses, national socialism could only be victorious, as its propagandists insisted, if the broad population became torchbearers of the new doctrine" (39). He claims Nietzsche was the "antithesis" of this attitude.

strong, the majority over a minority, speaks a language of pity and forgiveness, and attempts to legislate equality where nature dictates order of rank.²⁷

Whereas Carl Schmitt invokes the Biblical figure of the *Katechon*,²⁸ feeling that the fruition of this democratic historical dialectic (the apocalypse, the “mystery of iniquity”) can be prevented or held back, Channing, Emerson, Nietzsche, and Strauss consider this historical process an irreversible fact, yet they believe ancient modes and orders can become new again as if by a miracle of rhetorical persuasion. In “Success” Emerson, echoing Channing and anticipating Nietzsche, contends that “the oracles are never silent,” but the receiver must have a happy temperance and be in “frolic health” to receive “these fine communications.” Such a “good mind chooses what is positive, what is advancing,—embraces the affirmative” despite “our system [being] one of poverty” and knows that not “all are or shall be inspired” (W 7:288-89). Nietzsche, however, is not content to merely wait for uncertain events. For him history’s progress devalues the highest values and results in the homogenizing of European man. Since this process cannot easily be obstructed, Nietzsche advocates hastening it, pushing what is already falling. A fully homogenized, Enlightened, modern species, without God or any higher

²⁷ In “Fate,” an essay Nietzsche studied closely, Emerson writes, “So he has but one future, and that is already predetermined in his lobes and described in that little fatty, pig-eye, and squat form. All the privilege and all the legislation of the world cannot meddle or help to make a poet or a prince of him” (W 6:16).

²⁸ Gopal Balakrishnan, in *The Enemy: An Intellectual Portrait of Carl Schmitt*, explains that this figure, drawn from Paul’s second epistle to the Thessalonians (2:6-7), in Greek meant “the restrainer,” and in Luther’s translation became the “*Aufhalter*” (224). Schmitt wrote of several restraining figures who might prevent the coming of lawlessness or of the Anti-Christ which he saw as inherent in modernity and its rejection of Roman Catholicism, focusing especially on the “commissarial dictator” and the “sovereign.” John P. McCormick, in *Carl Schmitt’s Critique of Liberalism*, writes that the figure of the *Katechon* is “a medieval concept of the force, embodied either in an institution or a person, that can hold off the coming of the Antichrist” (112). McCormick argues that Schmitt considered himself a *Katechon*.

law, myth, or justification, will require some new purpose,²⁹ and Nietzsche prophesizes this will be provided by “a higher sovereign species,” a “master race whose sole task is to rule.” This master race will arise through a philosophical and political, albeit esoteric, education, through pedagogues of a “higher nature” whose difference lies in “incommunicability” and “distance of rank.” This proleptic education will proceed alongside the exoteric pedagogy of popular media that homogenizes the many. “The necessity to create a gulf, distance, order of rank,” Nietzsche writes, “is given *eo ipso*—not the necessity to retard this process” (*Will* § 876, 898).

Although my method for reading Emerson as an eloquent “esotericist” relies on Leo Strauss’s manner of reading the esoteric tradition of political philosophy and his discussions of esotericism in such texts as *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, neither Strauss nor any prominent Straussian seems to have read Emerson. Strauss’s writings, however, open up ways to read the political and philosophical intentions encoded in Emerson’s texts. In order to further illuminate Emerson’s and Channing’s rhetoric and their opposition to the modern state, it will be useful to examine a public lecture given by Leo Strauss on February 26, 1941 (published in 1999), at the New School for Social Research, treating Nietzsche and the Nazis, called “German Nihilism.” This was part of a general seminar on “Experiences of the Second World War.” The relationship between

²⁹ In “Art” Emerson writes: “In this country, at this time, other interests than religion and patriotism are predominant, and the arts, the daughters of enthusiasm, do not flourish. The genuine offspring of our ruling passions we behold. Popular institutions, the school, the reading-room, the telegraph, the post-office, the exchange, the insurance company, and the immense harvest of economical inventions, are the fruit of the equality and the boundless liberty of lucrative callings. These are superficial wants; and their fruits are these superficial institutions. But, as far as they accelerate the end of political freedom and national education, they are preparing the soil of man for fairer flowers and fruits in another age” (*W* 7:59). Politically, everything hinges on how one reads “the end.”

Nietzsche and Strauss is at least as obscure as the one between Emerson and Nietzsche. Strauss, often ambiguous in his discussions of Nietzsche, however, can teach us a great deal about Emerson's proleptics, or what Emerson borrowed by anticipation.

In the lecture "German Nihilism," Strauss calls National Socialism, "the most famous form of German nihilism—its lowest, most provincial, most unenlightened and most dishonorable form." Its "vulgarity" (or exotericism) accounts for its "great, if appalling, success." While predicting the ultimate defeat of this form of nihilism, Strauss holds that German (or true) nihilism, which has "deeper roots than the preachings of Hitler," will live on. He defines German nihilism not as a desire for the destruction of everything "but a desire for the destruction of something specific: of modern civilization." That this political position is capable of being vulgarized is the result of its not being "guided, or accompanied, by any clear positive conception" (357).

German nihilism does not object to the progress of "modern technical devices." It objects to the morality of modern civilization, the spirit and low values of the Anglo-Saxon West: the attempts to relieve man's estate, safeguard the rights of man by means of legislation, and provide the greatest happiness to the greatest number. True German nihilism demands a moral life and a closed society and protests against the amoral if not immoral internationalism of the open society with its goals of pleasure and gain. A closed society understands "the ceremonial of seriousness," and "the flag and the oath to the flag." It is oriented towards "the *Ernstfall*, the serious moment, M-day, war." Strauss writes, "Only life in such a *tense* atmosphere, only a life which is based on constant awareness of the *sacrifices* to which it owes its existence, and of the necessity, the *duty* of

sacrifice of life and all worldly goods, is truly human: the sublime is unknown to the open society" (358).

Nietzsche asks, "What will become of the man who no longer has any reasons for defending himself or for attacking? What affects does he have left if he has lost those in which like his weapons of defense and attack?" (*Will* § 924). Strauss seems to respond to this when he says the idea of progress in the modern state "is largely fictitious or merely verbal." Perhaps hearing the echo of Emerson's "Fate" as it resounds through Nietzsche's lonely mountains, Strauss writes,

Certain basic facts of human nature which have been honestly recognized by earlier generations who used to call a spade a spade, are at the present time verbally denied, superficially covered over by fictions legal and others, e.g., by the belief that one can abolish war by pacts not backed by military forces punishing him who breaks the pact, or by calling ministries of *war* ministries of *defence*, or by calling punishment sanctions. ("German" 358)

This protest, Strauss insists, however, has "*basically* nothing to do with bellicism, with *love* of war; nor with nationalism," but is based in a "love of morality." National Socialism has degraded this kind of intelligent protest, taught by Plato, Rousseau, and Nietzsche. The Nazis do not offer any clear conception of what will replace modernity which offers, either in the guise of democratic capitalism or stateless communism, "The prospect of a pacified planet, without rulers and ruled, of a planetary society devoted to production and consumption only, to the production and consumption of spiritual as well as material merchandise" (360).³⁰ What intelligent, young German nihilists hate, Strauss contends, is this prospect of a happy and satisfied world, a world of Last Men, "a world

³⁰ In *The Idea of Representation*, Carl Schmitt writes of "economic rationalism," "A machine which is a marvel of technical achievement caters indifferently and with equal thoroughness and exactitude for any and every demand, whether it be for silk blouses or poison gas" (39).

in which no great heart could beat and no great soul could breathe, a world without real, unmetaphoric, sacrifice, i.e., a world without blood, sweat, and tears” (360).

Unfortunately, these nihilists, according to Strauss, believed with the communists (and the capitalists, though Strauss does not say so to his American audience, but, like Martin Heidegger, Strauss equates the two political and economic systems philosophically) that this modern world was the inevitable outcome of a rational historical process; therefore, they chose the irrational.

There was nothing unnatural in the hatred these nihilists felt when facing the progress towards the Last Man, Strauss contends. What made them dangerous was that they were only able to think, historically and politically, according to the “rational” prejudices of their “progressive education.” What they needed, instead, were “*old-fashioned teachers*” who could understand and properly direct their rage (361). Instead they had Spengler, Jünger, Schmitt, and Heidegger (362). They also had the eloquent Hitler. Strauss, the Platonist, contrasts Socrates’ obstetrics with Hitler’s, writing,

The less said about him, the better. He will soon be forgotten. He is merely the rather contemptible *tool* of ‘History:’ the midwife who assists at the birth of the new epoch, of a new spirit; and a midwife usually understands nothing of the genius at whose birth she assists; she is not even supposed to be a competent gynecologist. (363)

Strauss tells his listeners not to lose hope: “A new reality is in the making. . . . What appears to you the end of the world is merely the end of an epoch, of the epoch which began in 1517 or so” (363-64). The progress of economics and civil society are not the progress philosophy calls for, he tells them. True nihilism rejects progressive political and economic principles not from a desire for destruction merely but from a position of culture (blood and soil) and of pride (365). The Nazis are not proper nihilists, for they do

not aim to destroy this epoch and inaugurate a new one. They play by this epoch's notions of power: world-dominion.³¹ Those rules include war, and the Nazis have martial virtues. That these are the only virtues left in the modern world proves, for Strauss, that "we live in an age of decline, of the decline of the West" (370). He says that in this "age of utter corruption, the only remedy possible is to destroy the edifice of corruption—'das System'—and return to the uncorrupted and incorruptible *origin*," to the condition of the potential, the state of Nature, where courage rules (or, as Emerson says in *Nature*, to the "original relation" to the universe) (370). The only way out of a Hobbesian and Lockean discourse that equates morality and rights is a return to ancient natural law. However, even the greatest German nihilist, Nietzsche, could not see this properly, for in his desire to push modernity to its limits, his revaluation of all values was too nonspecific for Strauss's ancient tastes.³² This is not to say that Nietzsche's vision of the future was not

³¹ Strauss, a Jew who fled Germany to escape the Nazis, cannot bring himself to condemn the pseudo-Nietzschean, Schmittian program of the Nazis, noting that despite whatever low opinion he has of them, he thinks their desire for world-dominion has deeper goals than merely maintaining the power of a political party. They must "derive a disinterested pleasure" from those "human qualities which enable nations to conquer. Any Nazi pilot, bomber, or submarine commander must feel "absolutely superior in human dignity to any traveling salesman or to any physician" (368-69).

³² Strauss repeats this critique in "What is Political Philosophy?" There he notes that Nietzsche hoped his prophetic call to revalue all values would tempt "the best men of the generations after him to become true selves and thus to form a new nobility which would rule the planet. He opposed the possibility of a planetary aristocracy to the alleged necessity of a universal classless and stateless society. Being certain of the tameness of modern western man, he preached the sacred right of 'merciless extinction' of large masses of men . . . He used much of his unsurpassable and inexhaustible power of passionate and fascinating speech for making his readers loathe, not only socialism and communism, but conservatism, nationalism and democracy as well. After having taken on this great political responsibility, he could not show his readers a way toward political responsibility. He left them no choice except between irresponsible indifference to politics and irresponsible political options" (WPP 54-55).

drawn upon ancient lines, only that he did not make this (eternal) return the explicitly stated goal towards which all good nihilists should strive.

The purpose of discussing Strauss's ideas about German nihilism in relation to Emerson and his teacher Channing is not, of course, to associate Emerson via Nietzsche with Hitler or the Nazis.³³ It does allow us, however, to see elements of the political philosophy Emerson shares with the likes of Nietzsche, Hitler, Schmitt, and Strauss, similarities that are often obscured by textual esotericism or critics' political or philosophical preconceptions. No ordinary "conservatives," these philosophers work toward reviving mythologies and hierarchies. My purpose is to create enough dissonance in the standard received canonical interpretation of Emerson as a firm believer in the sanctity of "the self-reliant individual" in a democracy to dislodge him from this canon and to "dehistoricize" him enough from a particular time in American history and thought to make it possible to read him as a political philosopher and, perhaps, to make it impossible to do otherwise. My intention is not merely to demonstrate how Emerson is

³³ In 1943, Irene P. McKeehan published "Carlyle, Hitler, and Emerson: A Comparison of Political Theories." Perhaps provoked by studies such as *Victorian Critics of Democracy* by Benjamin E. Lippincott, where it is asserted that Carlyle anticipated fascist ideals fifty years before their advent, believing as he did in an authoritarian, military state with a strong leader, McKeehan's article attempts to disassociate Emerson from the proto-fascism of Carlyle and the National Socialism of Hitler and the Nazis. Comparing Hitler, Carlyle, and Emerson on the issues of 1) democracy, 2) freedom of speech and of the press, 3) attitudes toward labor, 4) the hero or leader, 5) militarism, force, ruthlessness, and 6) racial inequality, McKeehan argues that despite his aristocratic aloofness, Emerson had a "mystic faith" in the ballot box, believed in the right of "minority groups" to dissent from mass opinion, believed laborers should be treated humanely, felt that great heroes should be revered but not slavishly obeyed, felt society should be based on love (but he loved a good war), and though prejudiced toward the Anglo-Saxon race approved of "the mixture of peoples characteristic of the United States." Like Cavell's apologetics, McKeehan's ring a little hollow. For other comparisons of Emerson and Nietzsche before or during WWII, see Shaw, Hummel, and Shottlaender.

finally anti-democratic nor to label him merely an elitist or conservative, but to show how his method of writing encodes a political agenda and is part of a philosophical tradition that favors the few over the many. This is not to say that no one has noticed Emerson's political philosophy or been shocked by this recognition. F. O. Matthiessen in *American Renaissance*, for example, sees how Emerson's man of self-reliant energy can easily become the hard-willed *Übermensch* and the brutal man of Fascism (368).

Michael Lopez, in *Emerson and Power*, notes that the Emerson Industry has constantly felt the absence of some unnamed something at the heart of Emerson's major texts. His journals and letters are searched in an attempt to account for this. There is a "persistent impatience with his texts," Lopez writes, "an anxious readiness to believe that there is some essential deficiency at the heart of his reputation—an incoherence, a naïveté, which demands that his real significance be sought elsewhere" (17). My contention is that this unnamed something can be found by taking into account all of Emerson's published and unpublished writings (any good philological reading would do so), but it would be better sought in the subtle stratagems, skotomized intentions, and Montaigne-like trickery of the published texts themselves. What is to be found in *this* "elsewhere" is hardly naïve.

From the Lyceum, or, Emerson's *Ágrapha Dógmata*

The measure of a master is his success in bringing all men round to his opinion twenty years later.

—Emerson, "Culture" (W 6:157)

Ernst: But I do know how easily someone who is sharp of mind deceives himself, how easily he applies or imputes plans or intentions to others, which never ever occurred to them.

Falk: But where do we get the conclusions we draw regarding people's plans and intentions? From their individual actions, wouldn't you say?

—Lessing, "Ernst and Falk" (294)

Emerson's *Early Lectures*, delivered after he abandoned his careers as schoolteacher and Unitarian preacher, begin with a series of lectures on Natural History at the Masonic Temple in Boston.³⁴ A strange thing about Emerson scholarship is that almost no one places any significance on Emerson's lecturing at the Masonic Temple. Was Emerson a freemason? He never says one way or the other, though there were numerous Masonic tracts in his library³⁵ and his letters and journals reveal he was interested in the anti-Masonic policies of the United States government.³⁶ He also mentions the Freemasons in several essays. For example, in "Nominalist and Realist," from *Essays: Second Series*, Emerson writes,

Wherever you go, a wit like your own has been before you, and has realized its thought. The Eleusinian mysteries, the Egyptian architecture, the Indian astronomy, the Greek sculpture, show that there always were seeing and knowing men in the planet. The world is full of Masonic ties, of guilds, of secret and public regions of honor; that of scholars, for example; and that of gentlemen, fraternizing with the upper class of every country and every culture. (W 2:221)

In "Manners," from the same volume, he also claims that the "element which unites all the most forcible persons of every country" exists as a kind of "masonic sign" (W 2:119).

³⁴ The editors of the *Early Lectures* say these occurred in November and December 1833, but Cabot dates them as 1832 (W 14:710).

³⁵ Walter Harding's *Emerson's Library* shows Emerson owned tracts from the Antimasonic Party (1829-30), Charles Louis Cadet de Gassicourt's *The Tomb of James Molai; or, The Secret of the Conspirators* (1797), Richard Carlile's *An Exposure of Freemasonry; or, A Mason's Printed Manual, with an Introductory Keystone to the Royal Arch of Freemasonry* (1831), W. N. Crawford's *The New Biblical Epoch Caused by the Restoration of the Ancient Science of Freemasonry* (1873), *Declaration of the Modern Free-Masons* (n.d.), bylaws of the Corinthian Lodge Freemasons of Concord, MA (1859), and Pliny Merrick's *A Letter on Speculative Free Masonry* (1829).

³⁶ Lee Rust Brown connects Emerson's lectures on natural history with the hysterical populism of the anti-Masonic movement and Andrew Jackson's demolition of the Second Bank of the United States. He notes there was widespread paranoia and suspicion that organized and secret forces were the cause of the problems of contemporary economic life. Emerson, he notes, redirects this rage to expose conspiracies towards the benign speculations of natural history. Such natural conspiracy theorizing was safer, or more disciplined, and offered another way to discover the hidden order of things (138).

In "Culture," from *The Conduct of Life*, Emerson mentions the freemasons twice, first referring to a freemason's biography of the freemason George Washington (W 6:128) and next noting that skills in intelligence or sports "constitute . . . secret freemasonries" (W 6:138). No doubt the Masonic Hall was the site of many public events, but could the significance of the space be lost on Emerson, who, as an enthusiastic reader of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, would have no doubt read Lessing's dialogue "Ernst and Falk: Conversations for the Freemasons" (1778/80)?

In this dialogue, Ernst queries Falk (Lessing's mouthpiece) about the Freemasons. Ernst seems only to know that Freemasons are a secret society with secret handshakes and rituals and that Freemasons often engage in philanthropic acts. But Falk, in his responses, which test Ernst while initiating him into a new kind of thinking, lets it be known that there is more to Freemasonry than "words, signs, and customs" or lodges and philanthropy. Even those who have become Freemasons may not fully understand Freemasonry (280). Falk, however, knows "what Freemasonry is, and why, when, and where it existed and why and by what means it is fostered or hindered" (279). He knows it is a necessity that originated with civil society, that it has always existed, but what it is cannot be said, even by "approximate" concepts, which could prove either useless or dangerous (280-81). Even the good deeds Freemasons do, the salutary means by which they "spread their order" and encourage good deeds by others, are *ad extra*, deeds done "to catch the eye of the populace as a whole, those deeds that they perform merely because they are intended to catch the eye of the populace" (281-83). Through these deeds they "gain respect and toleration," but, says Falk,

the true deeds of the Freemasons are so great, so farseeing, that whole centuries may well pass before it will be possible to say, this is what they have done!

Nevertheless, they have done all that is good that still exists in the world—note that: in the *world*. And they continue to contribute to all good that will still come to be in this world—note that: in this *world*. . . . The true deeds of the Freemasons have as their goal, rendering what in general are customarily termed good deeds, superfluous. (283)

Freemasonry is, therefore, perhaps, a kind of secret kingship of the philosophers.

Whereas many consider the modern (18th century) form of state government “the ultimate end of nature . . . the ultimate goal towards which nature proceeds,” Falk asserts, states as “means of human invention” are but fallible attempts to secure human happiness. Unlike infallible divine means, fallible human means “frequently not only fail to correspond to their intent, but instead even bring about exactly the opposite” (286). For Falk, there can never be “the best form of government.” Any attempt to govern all people together under a single system of laws will fail because 1) the world is too large a space to govern, 2) the necessary subdivisions would create peoples with their own interests, customs, morals, and religion, 3) attempts to equally divide possessions and eliminate class differences would only last for a couple of generations after which people’s natural abilities to increase their property or their natural inclinations to squander it would reassert themselves, so 4) peoples would necessarily be as divided as they ever were (286-89). For the Freemason, therefore, the best form of government already exists, for peoples are united through their divisions “and only kept unified through unceasing division” (289). (This state wherein stasis is maintained by means of the constant antagonism of friend and enemy is what Schmitt calls “the political,” and one finds a contemporary version of this thinking in Samuel L. Huntington’s “The Clash of Civilizations?”) One also finds it in Emerson’s “Considerations by the Way”: “Wars, fires, plagues, break up immovable routine, clear the ground of rotten races and dens of

distemper, and open a fair field to new men. There is a tendency in things to right themselves, and the war or revolution or bankruptcy that shatters a rotten system, allows things to take a new and natural order. . . . Nature is upheld by antagonism. Passions, resistance, danger, are educators. We acquire the strength we have overcome. Without war, no soldiers; without enemies, no hero" [W 6:242].)

Freemasons, who have done all that is good that still exists in the world, preside over this perpetual war of differences. "Above the prejudices of the populace," they "know exactly where patriotism ceases to be a virtue." They do not "succumb to the prejudices of the religions to which they had been born," and they do not believe that everything believed to be good or true is good or true (Lessing 290). These sort of men exist everywhere and at all times "to labor against the unavoidable evils of the state," not as Freemasons but as individual citizens who "make it *just one* of their endeavors to draw those divisions, whereby men become so alien to one another, as close together as possible" (291-92). These evils may never be abolished completely, but the idea of doing so continues to be cultivated, though centuries may pass before there is evidence of what has been done (293). In this process, one can "fulfill the highest obligation of Masonry without being called a Freemason" (297) for Freemasonry is perhaps but a "scheme" or an "exterior, visible appearance" (302) which allows one to carry "out a part of one's secret intentions quite openly to mislead the suspicion which always presumes something entirely different than what it sees" (295).

Whether or not Emerson was a Freemason is a question that perhaps has no answer. That he practiced a similar scheme of prudence, which Lessing recommends, however, is beyond question. That he understood the distinction between esoteric

teachings, which ought to be concealed, and the exoteric presentation of salutary teachings, which are not facts but mere possibilities taught for reasons of prudence or expediency and are addressed to unphilosophic and inattentive men either to keep them out or to draw those with the potential to become philosophic in, is what I am demonstrating through this examination of his writings. That he learned this distinction through his own exertions in philosophy, that he was converted to the necessity of esotericism through his study of philosophy, and that this conversion lead him away from the politics and the philosophy of the Enlightenment is what I am attempting to demonstrate by examining what and how he read. Emerson may or may not have been a Freemason, but like them he knew there were truths that ought to be concealed, knew from whom to conceal them, and knew the virtue in drawing lines of division as close as possible.

Emerson's early lectures, unpublished during his lifetime, reveal much about the consistency of his schemes and his combinations of science, politics, philosophy, religion, ethics, and the occult relations of nature in his published texts. While some of the material that makes up this first series of lectures finds its way into *Nature*, the lectures are more than notes toward a book. Instead, they begin not only preparing, creating, and educating an audience for *Nature*, but in them Emerson begins to take on and understand his role as the teacher of new and dangerous ideas. The importance of Plato, Lessing, Bacon, and others who know the difference between the exoteric and the esoteric on Emerson's thinking should not be underestimated.

In the first lecture, "The Uses of Natural History," Emerson asserts his Socratic ignorance, avowing his rank amateur status in this field ("I have followed my inclination

rather than consulted my ability”), as he discourses on the wonder and excitement he felt at the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris. Like many scholars, Lee Rust Brown, in *The Emerson Museum: Practical Romanticism and the Pursuit of the Whole*, sees Emerson’s voyage of discovery to Europe’s museums as dictating the trajectory of his future career. Though our emphasis differs on the nature of that trajectory, I agree with Brown when he notes that Emerson learned a certain curatorial tendency while at the *Jardin* which he used in his writing. Brown characterizes this as the “methodical pursuit of the whole versus extravagant piling up of new parts” (107). Brown also notes, “Emerson founded his career on the realization that, while he could not deliver the wholly synthesized, encyclopedic presentation of nature called for by natural history, he could still do the critical work of a museum” (209). Brown is, I think, accurate in his diagnosis of Emerson’s pursuit of the whole, but he is led astray where he thinks that Emerson’s interest in studying, or speaking on, natural history was anything other than a stratagem. Therefore, one ought not take too literally, as so many critics do, Emerson’s seemingly conversionary statement, repeated from his journals, “I will be a naturalist” (EL 1:10).

In these lectures, Emerson discovers the proper methods and modes of conveying and portraying his ancient thoughts in modern times and of revitalizing what had been demythologized or forgotten by the progress of the times and the Higher Criticism of the Bible. Emerson has his eyes on science and nature not as means to produce inventions to relieve man’s estate but as a rhetorical means of invention to reveal truths about the natural order and the social order. Emerson discourses on natural history in order to indicate how “the limits of the possible are enlarged, and the real is stranger than the imaginary,” but what he is most interested in are the “strange sympathies” that invite him

to understand the “occult relation” between nature and man. As more “secrets are penetrated,” Emerson feels greater “inducements to the study Natural History” (EL 1:10).

(While these “occult” relations may resemble the hermetic or theosophical knowledge Arthur Versluis writes of in *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance*, or the scientific knowledge derived from magic and alchemy that Eric Wilson writes of in *Emerson’s Sublime Science*, it would perhaps be best to read Emerson’s use of the term as more technical, or more “occulted.” Though an esotericist might use a term like “occult” in an “ordinary” way to throw careless readers off his scent, a careful writer who uses words as stratagems is well-versed in concealing his plans [*de occultandis consiliis*] [Frontinus, *The Stratagems* l.i.1-4]. Things and relations may be occulted naturally, in a way science can discover through experiments, or intentionally by those who understand that some things ought to be covered over, hidden, or concealed from the eyes, ears, and fingers of the vulgar. Occult relations may be blocked from the normal view by something physical, or may simply be something mysterious not apprehended by the mind or imperceptible to the senses, or they may be secrets kept on purpose, communicated only to the initiated. Or, as a trope of rhetoric, *occultatio* functions as a stratagem of concealing, insinuating, or suggesting indirectly.)

While on the vulgar level of “public estimation” the progress of science has been welcomed, Emerson is more interested in the “inexplicable fact or new class of relations” that appear “every now and then,” which do “not so much invite as to defy scientific solution,” such as, for example, Mesmer’s Animal Magnetism³⁷ (EL 1:10). These are, however, mere curiosities for the neophyte. Ultimately, Emerson is less interested in

³⁷ Franz Mesmer (1734-1815), friend of Mozart, was known to be a Freemason. Like the vocabulary of the stratagem, the vocabulary of mesmerism lends itself to many uses.

natural science as a rigorous discipline or as a source of fantastic mysteries than he is in the biography of Great Men who translate discovery into action:

The history of modern times has repeatedly shown that a single man devoted to science may carry forward the mechanic arts and multiply the products of commerce more than the united population of a country can accomplish in ages wherein no particular devotion to scientific pursuits exists. (EL 1:12)

Such a man acts, for Emerson, borrowing Bacon's Aristotelian term, as a "primary cause." Modern science substituted the elevation of Man for the elevation of men. The scientific method democratized the pursuit of science, turning it into a formula available to all. As Channing also pointed out, science—like modern politics—no longer needed great men or geniuses to guide it or make discoveries; it only needed managers. Emerson understood with Plato that philosophy was an arduous quest and with Bacon that scientific experimentation is not simply a method but is an ordeal to be undergone as a test of one's worth, character, and nature. To truly understand natural history and its occult relation to human history, one needs to comprehend how great men have unleashed and still can unleash "an accumulated force to act upon the future" (EL 1:13) though their transformations may require "ages for [their] completion" (EL 1:15).

In the lecture "The Uses of Natural History," Emerson speaks of how nature (like philosophy) naturally sorts the few from the many saying that the careful study of natural history—the decryption of God's encryptions—"will make the stones speak," but not everyone is likely to achieve "the state of mind which nature makes indispensable to all such as inquire of her secrets" (EL 1:20): "Indeed it is worth considering in all animated nature what different aspect the same object presents to the ignorant and the instructed eye" (EL 1:17). Nature, he says, "yields no answer to petulance, or dogmatism, or affectation; only to patient, docile observation" (EL 1:20). Emerson borrows from

Bacon's *Novum Organon* when he writes, "The naturalist commands nature by obeying her" (EL 1:20). One of the primary effects of the study of natural history is that "it generates enthusiasm" (EL 1:21).

(The term "enthusiasm" is no more accidentally chosen than was "virtuous" or "occult." Perhaps Emerson means by it the usual thing: intensity of feeling, "passionate eagerness in any pursuit, proceeding from an intense conviction of the worthiness of the object" [*OED*]. Or, Emerson could be thinking of dæmonic influence: "virtuous" can mean "endowed with, or possessed of, inherent or natural virtue or power [often of a magical, occult, or supernatural kind]; potent or powerful in effect, influence, or operation on this account," for "enthusiasm" also denotes "possession by a god, supernatural inspiration, prophetic or poetic frenzy" [*OED*]. If Emerson's discourse on science is a series of stratagems, then he might mean to possess his hearers with a passion that resembles prophetic frenzy. He may mean to be a dæmon speaking to those few to whom dæmons speak. Of course, as stratagems, Emerson's talks on natural science might also be denigrating the pursuit of the science while elevating the thought of the natural, for "enthusiasm" also means "fancied inspiration," or an "ill-regulated or misdirected religious emotion, extravagance of religious speculation" [*OED*]. In fact, the *OED* cites Emerson's "The Over-Soul" as an example of this definition: "Everywhere the history of religion betrays a tendency to enthusiasm." If we are to successfully read Emerson's esotericism, we have to presume he may have meant each of these things.)

The study of natural history, Emerson says—sounding like a Freemason, like Nietzsche—creates or inspires heroes "much agitated by the grandeur of the fact about to be disclosed" (EL 1:21), writers of "high prophetic tone" who can wait centuries for their

proper readers (EL 1:22), and men with a “high unconditional devotion to their cause” (EL 1:23). It can produce what he will call in his next series of lectures “great men.” Emerson’s intention in discussing the study of natural history and its effects, is, he says, following Socrates’ anti-Sophistic lead, “to counter-act in the community the extreme and debasing influences of party spirit, and the excessive love of gain.” If man and the hierarchical laws of nature were truly explained by natural science to the few capable of understanding them, “many wild errors” in politics, philosophy, and theology could be corrected, and each would know “his true place in the system of being” (EL 1:23). By following the rank ordering of nature demanded by justice instead of the democratic order, all would see nature (as known by the pre-Socratics and Pythagoreans) as a better guide than modern thinking, since only nature’s metaphors truly “translate the laws of ethics” (EL 1:25).

In the lecture “The Relation of Man to the Globe,” Emerson notes that in nature the cycles of some things require thousands of years. Since the mid-1700s, Emerson says the study of organic nature has proceeded by inference or Baconian induction, “by putting together a most curious tissue of circumstantial evidence” (EL 1:28). Should this holistic method of studying organic nature be applied to the study of human nature, Emerson argues, eventually the world would no longer seem to be composed of mere farms, battlefields, markets, or abiding places. Instead, it would seem a monument etched with hieroglyphs. On its surface we could read how each age, for numberless centuries, “has somewhere inscribed its history in gigantic letters—too deep to be obliterated—but so far apart, and without visible connection, that only the most diligent observer—say rather—an uninterrupted succession of patient observers—can read them”

(EL 1:29). These careful observers, Emerson is confident, will appear again, for they have appeared as if by prophecy in past ages when the time for their observations arrived, and are even now being educated by “slow and ancient preparation” (EL 1:33).

Emerson’s choice of “the capital art of navigation” as a metaphor of progress in “The Relation of Man to the Globe” indicates Emerson’s Baconian understanding of the ancient teaching concerning daring and moderation, and it signifies that he knows what goes in the middle. In “The Flight of Icarus; Also Scylla and Charybdis,” from *The Wisdom of the Ancients*, Bacon reads these two fables as demonstrations of the ancient wisdom concerning the necessity of moderation in moral and intellectual pursuits.³⁸ The youthful Icarus, says Bacon, chose the path of excess, which in the realm of morals at least is preferable to the path of defect. Bacon compares the navigation between Scylla and Charybdis to “the conduct of the understanding,” for both require skilful pilots. Though his explanation of this fable is brief (“though it suggests reflections without end”), Bacon writes that

we are meant to understand that in every knowledge and science, and in the rules and axioms appertaining to them, a mean must be kept between too many distinctions and too much generality,—between the rocks of the one and the whirlpools of the other. For these two are notorious for the shipwreck of wits and arts. (853)

In navigation, Emerson writes, we observe “the smallness of the odds” in man’s favor and his nearness to “the edge of destruction,” but also his skills and powers (his capabilities, his prudence) that keep him safe. Navigation appears to be a thing of great

³⁸ Noticing no hand-scribbled notes in Emerson’s copy of the tenth volume of Bacon’s *Works* housed at the Houghton Library at Harvard (a fact that I confirmed), Vivian Hopkins concludes that Emerson did not read Bacon’s *De Sapientia Veterum* (*The Wisdom of the Ancients*). However, Emerson refers to this text in his “The Age of Fable” (EL 1:259).

risk, but the dangers are counted, weighed, and measured by proper preparation. Though the threats are incessant, the pilot is confident and his attention matches the danger. A skilful seaman, who knows what he is doing, like the esotericist, seems at times to guess at navigation, and sometimes there is as much chance as skill in his success. The art of navigation provides, Emerson says, many examples of the dangers man faces and of how thin the line between safety and destruction is (35-38). His conclusion to this lecture, which “may appear miscellaneous sketches,” is this: “Design! It is all design” (48-49).

In “The Naturalist,” Emerson writes that the intellectual discipline of Natural Science “sharpens the discrimination” and “teaches the difficult art of distinguishing between the similar and the same” (EL 1:75). “Possessed with the conviction that Nature means something,” we seek the cipher that will make sense of the characters carved on Egyptian remains we have fingered for thousands of years, the cipher for “the hieroglyphics of Nature,” for the “open secret ... not translatable into words” (EL 1:78). Pythagoras, Swedenborg, Goethe, Brahmins, and other contemplative minds have all interpreted these codes, and though their opinions failed to persuade everyone, they do provide proof of an uninterrupted succession of like-minded philosophers and “an obstinate belief in the human mind” that these secrets can be known (EL 1:79).

At the close of his lectures on science, Emerson states what he has learned: “Composition is more important than the elegance of the individual forms” and is “more important than the beauty of individual forms to effect” (73-74). The composition and collections of a museum or a cabinet such as those he saw at the *Jardin* that caused him to utter, “I will be a naturalist,” can furnish “hints, intimations of the inward Law of

Nature.” A collection of seemingly random things—or an essay or lecture composed with a seeming randomness—can reveal connections and order to the careful observer:

So no intelligent person can come into a well arranged cabinet of natural productions without being excited to unusual reveries, without being conscious by instinctive perception of relations which he can only feel without being able to comprehend or define. (82)

This principle of composition is one any careful reader of Emerson must consult when navigating his seeming contradictions and randomness.

To Fashion Great Men

The intelligent have a right over the ignorant, namely, the right of instructing them.

—Emerson, “Plato: New Readings” (W 4:82)

A state is seldom a perfect society, except at its beginning, or in its crises of peril. A great danger or a strong desire as a war of defence, or an enterprise of enthusiasm, will at any time knit a whole population into one man, and whilst it last brings every individual into his exact place, one to watch, one to deliberate, one to act, one to speak, and one to record.

—Emerson, Lecture on “Society” (1836) (EL 2:105)

With his series of lectures on Biography, for the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge at the Masonic Temple, beginning in 1835, Emerson brings together the occult relations of natural history with the occult relations of human history. He demonstrates how to translate laws of nature into an ethics and a model for human society, and the study of history into politics, philosophy, and prophecy. The introductory lecture of this series, “Tests of Great Men,” has disappeared. Cabot’s summary lists the qualities the lecture ascribed to a great man: 1) his soul pursues an end, 2) he believes in this end, 3) he has a healthy mind and a good humor, 4) he has the ability to set other minds in motion, 5) he believes in superhuman influence, 6) he has unselfish aims, and 7) he has a breadth of vision that countenances neither trivialities nor

prejudices (W 14:712-13). Emerson's great men, therefore, seem to combine the qualities of Socrates and Plato with those of a good general. These early lectures on biography anticipate the essays in *Representative Men*, as the lost introduction does the "Uses of Great Men." However, neither Emerson's early or late theory of Great Men resembles Thomas Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero Worship*.³⁹ Emerson's intention is to fashion Great Men, not report or venerate them.

In the first lecture, "Michel Angelo Buonaroti" (whom Emerson treats as representative of "the Artist" and whom he refers to in his journals as a Platonist), Emerson marvels at the ability of Michelangelo's hands to execute his mind's conceptions, at his superiority to the men of his time, which prevented them from discerning his true greatness, and at the posthumous influence of his works. In the second lecture, "Martin Luther" (representative of "the Reformer"), Emerson perhaps most avails himself of the immunity of the commentator, revealing his thoughts through the discussion of another. While Emerson does not approve of the historical and political changes that followed in Luther's wake, he does admire the man who could cause a spiritual revolution through the force of his will and the power of his convictions—his "spiritual arms" (EL 1:127).

39 Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo* that "nobody can get more out of things, including books, than he already knows. For what one lacks access to from experience one will have no ear." Thus his discussion of the "overman," which for him designates "a type of supreme achievement" in opposition to "modern" men, has been misconstrued as "an 'idealistic' type of a higher kind of man, half 'saint,' half 'genius'." He repudiates these characterizations as he does the accusations that he is Darwinian or that his discussion of the "overman" resembles those of "that unconscious and involuntary counterfeiter, Carlyle" on "hero worship" (261). Wynkoop also asserts that Emerson's heroes, designed as inspiring moral characters, had a different purpose than Carlyle's (35).

In a spiritual crisis concerning the rituals of the Church, similar to Emerson's problems concerning the Lord's Supper, which caused him to resign from the ministry (see "The Lord's Supper" [W 11: 7-29]), Luther sought the path of Faith over Works, a path where individuals could seek and secure their own salvation without the mediation of the Church or its interpretations. Luther's crisis came to a head in 1517, but, Emerson notes, few persons of consequence took notice of its product: his 99 Theses. He was compelled to take bolder steps: he wrote, he translated, he published, and he preached. "Instruct the people," Emerson says speaking in Luther's voice, yet perhaps thinking of Bacon's Idols, "and the Images will fall of themselves" (EL 1:129). Luther's books were published into a world where books were new, valued, and rare. Emerson regrets the loss of that world due to the invention of the printing press and the popularity of newspapers: "we are born in an age when falsehood uses the press as freely as truth" (EL 1:131). Emerson says, however, that Luther was no philosopher, and "his speculations upon abstract questions are of no worth." He calls his theology "Jewish" (meaning, perhaps, it prescribed only negative laws—the "thou shall nots") and denigrates his reforms for only going after the Roman Church and not the entire creed of Christianity (EL 1:131).

Emerson describes Luther as poetic, but not in a literary sense. Luther sees everything in its symbolic aspect, and this gives him poetic force but also a poetic narrowness (EL 1:133-34). Unlike Michelangelo, Luther, a lesser figure, could, through his enthusiasm, act on the minds of his contemporaries (EL 1:132). He considered himself, at least in Emerson's retelling, "a chosen instrument" and considered God "a Genius or local and partial tutelary Dæmon" (EL 1:134). Emerson, perhaps revealing his intentions instead of Luther's, notes that Luther continued "the series of ancient prophets

by whom the will of God communicated to men" (EL 1:136). Luther was an "Enthusiast of a new order," and he was to his age what Homer was to the Greek, Moses to the Hebrew, Alfred to the Saxon, and Washington to the American epochs (EL 1:141, 138). He had "Patience," yet he failed to navigate the middle path, and like Icarus erred toward excess, for he spoke a violent language "which cannot be counterfeited and inspires confidence" but which is not the language of a truly great man (EL 1:139). He was, however, prophetic, and he was aware "of a whole new class of facts and feelings which a lawgiver ought to be acquainted with." With his "warlike genius," he fought the Pope, devils, and factions in his "boisterous and stormy books" that sought to "remove obstructions" (EL 1:140-41). Emerson writes:

His violent impulses enable him to strike with effect and his simple good nature enables him to recover himself for a new blow. Other men have at critical moments launched the right word that fell like fire on the mine, and heaved society to and fro, but wanted a reserve of power to make good their enterprise. When the first force was spent, and men came back to the genius that had inspired them for aids to resist the reaction they had awakened, there was no force found in him to resist, much less, to furnish others for resistance. But Luther was a fountain of strength, and resembled the torpedo which from the inexhaustible electricity within it affords an unceasing artillery of new shocks, each more violent than the last. (EL 1:141)

This power, says Emerson is what "the simple, sincere man possesses over the defective or half man" (EL 1:142). There is "no crack" in Luther's conviction. Such an earnest man stands in glaring contrast to men of Emerson's time who, as he repeats in *Nature*, are imitative, artificial, and prematurely old. Just as scientific revolutions in Emerson's study of Natural History served as the singular cause of innovation and change, so the story of the Reformation is for Emerson "the story of a singular person who was the instrument" of a great revolution. The moral that appears for Emerson from this fable of Martin Luther is "the superiority of immaterial to material power" (EL 1:143).

Emerson writes in "John Milton" (representative of the poet/scholar/controversialist), that the "fame of a great man . . . changes with time." When his fame increases, it is due to the great man's will: he has posthumously "wrought" these changes and altered public taste (EL 1:145-46). Emerson argues that every masterpiece "goes on for some ages reconciling the world unto itself, and despotically fashioning the public ear." It continually weakens opposition to it and, in the process, "a new race grows up in the taste and spirit of the work, with the utmost advantage for seeing intimately its power and beauty" (EL 1:148). Emerson slights Milton for favoring the particular over the whole, yet Milton has the power to "inspire": "Virtue goes out of him into others" (EL 1:148). He has "discharged the office of every great man, namely, to raise the idea of Man in the minds of his contemporaries and of posterity" (EL 1:149). Unlike Bacon, "an ambitious and profound calculator,—a great man of a vulgar sort," and Locke, who is "virtuous without enthusiasm, and intelligent without poetry" (EL 1:149), Milton possessed, or was possessed by, the "intellectual voice, penetrating through ages, and propelling its melodious undulations forward through the coming world" (EL 1:153), and he submitted his gifts to this "mysterious source." Emerson calls Milton "an apostle of freedom," for he fought for civil, literary, and ecclesiastical freedoms (EL 1:159). Yet prudently he desired "the liberty of the wise man most," and "wished that his writings should be communicated only to those who desired to see them" (EL 1:159-60).

Like Coleridge, Emerson admired Burke as representative of the prudent philosophical statesman. Burke, who loved Plutarch, Demosthenes, and the *Aeneid* (EL 1:184), approached the ideal of the philosopher king. Emerson notes,

It has rarely happened in history that a philosopher by genius should be called to take any important part in the administration of affairs. Not only a prejudice often

envenomed is against them among vulgar minds, but for the most part their own incapacity for action and strong disinclination to business forbids. (EL 1:186)

The Stoic Marcus Aurelius was a philosopher on the throne, says Emerson, but he was less a philosopher than a moral speculator. He sought not a new truth but a “sublime yet simple theory of duties” (EL 1:186). Machiavelli had access to the throne, yet Emerson claims, “his influence is too small to be taken into the account of European history” (EL 1:187).⁴⁰ Edmund Burke’s intellect was “infinitely more comprehensive and minutely informed.” He possessed foresight (*anchinoia*): “He saw all things from his own point of view but in a glance that shot so far and grasped so much that particular objects still seemed to occupy their proportionate place, and whilst he magnified them they did yet not break the harmony of nature” (EL 1:188).

Emerson calls Burke the last philosophical politician. He understood the middle path and the relationship between eloquence and stability, but he was never a philosopher in the highest nor the lowest sense of that term. He neither proposed to satisfy the wishes of the majority (as a democrat) nor legislate for human nature as it ought to be (as a Platonist) (EL 1:189). He appears as a conservative to modern times—the teacher of order, peace, and elegance, the adorer of existing institutions; however, he was no common conservative. He sought to destroy the influence of revolutionary principles in England and eloquently warned “against the contagious spirit of the French Revolution until he had turned the tide of public sentiment” (EL 1:195-96). What prevented Burke from becoming a radical reformer was, says Emerson, that he had exquisite taste: “As a

⁴⁰ This contradicts Emerson’s earlier statements about Machiavelli. When a writer, or a general, commits a manifest blunder, Machiavelli teaches, there is always fraud beneath it. (See Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*.)

general observation I suppose it will hold, that men of fine tastes are not fond of revolutions" (EL 1:190).

Taste, then, became the topic for Emerson's lectures on English literature in 1835-36, also for the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge at the Masonic Temple in Boston. In the first lecture of this series "On the best mode of inspiring the correct tastes in English literature," Emerson renews his Platonist pessimism regarding the democratic ends of progressive politics and education saying, "I confess, gentlemen, I have not much confidence in the application of any mechanical means to promote a spiritual end." There can be neither alchemical solutions nor general enlightenment concerning things most needful:

As all the physicians of the world cannot manufacture one drop of blood, neither can all the colleges make one scholar nor the best library a reader. If the genius of the country is wholly averse to learning and so warlike, or commercial, or dissolute, that they cannot hear the voice of their wise men I have no hope that any expedients will cure their deafness. (EL 1:210)

But this should not worry those of Masonic or Platonist tastes, for they understand that it is "Providence which divides labor," and what God has thought fit does not "warrant our interference to forward changes." Just as one seeking knowledge of the whole must submit to nature, so here too Emerson advises, "Admitting this fact, which being expressed in other words is a canon of philosophy, that a truth or a book of truths can be received only by the same spirit that gave it forth." Following this, it is easy to accept that "society divides itself into two classes in reference to any influence of learning:" the "natural scholars," who are "hindered by unfavorable circumstances from the knowledge of their powers and calling," and the many who spend their leisure "on those employments to which the custom of the day gives importance, those who if born in a

military age would be soldiers, in a trading community become speculators, and in a reading community become men of letters" (EL 1:210-11).

Emerson sees it as his duty, as one in an uninterrupted succession of philosophers, to dedicate himself to the formation and cultivation of this class of natural scholars. Only in this way can the long road leading the best regime be paved. Emerson writes, "In bringing a scholar into acquaintance with himself and his proper objects we render all men such a service as he does to an army who nominates Washington or Napoleon to the Command in chief. Every suggestion that bears on this end has value" (EL 1:211). The fulfillment of this office of introducing "a good mind to the writings of a kindred intelligence" allows him to perform the function of more than just a matchmaker: "It must be our main object to consummate this marriage between the mind of the scholar and the mind of the author" (EL 1:211). The proper education of natural scholars is not based on the "miserable books that swarm like flies in the land," but only on those books "which deserve to last," those "Scriptures approved by the voice of Human Nature in several ages" (EL 1:212). Plato is an example: "There are not at any time in the world apparently more than a dozen persons who read and understand Plato; never enough to pay for an edition of his works; yet to every generation they come down, as if God brought them in his hand" (EL 1:212). Great books are "ships that sail in the sea of Time" and are "the benefactors or the enemies of mankind." As he will note many times, these famed books are at once exoteric and esoteric. He writes, drawing on Coleridge:

A good book is like the Ancient Mariner who can tell his tale only to a few men destined to hear it. It passes by thousands and thousands but when it finds a true reader it enters into him as a new soul. A good reader is rare. As we say translations are rare because to be a good translator needs all the talents of an original author so to be a good reader needs the high qualities of a good writer. Reading must not be passive. The pupil must conspire with the Teachers. It

needs Shakespear, it needs a Bacon, to read Shakespear and Bacon in the best manner. (EL 1:214)

Emerson warns against a rhetorical instruction that considers style a matter of choice. Natural scholars should be taught to banish this “false doctrine that there’s something arbitrary or conventional and letters. . . . Let him learn how false is the vulgar belief that in good writing anything else could be said than that which is said” (EL 1:215).

In these lectures, Emerson is only interested in “the education of true scholars” who “exist like ore in the mine wherever is society and we do the part of good citizens whenever we find one in the obscurity or when we train one more happily born” (EL 1:215). They are the lifeblood of a literary republic, and, by implication, an educational system that fails to educate the few in its quest to educate the many is not only a bad regime pursuing bad ends, but it is unnatural: “I do not think it was designed that all should hold the pen any more than all should hold the helm, or weave, or sing, or paint.” Instead of attempting to educate all for material ends, Emerson would prefer teaching the many “that the purest pleasures of life were at hand unknown to them” (EL 1:212). This would lead the curious and the capable few to discover what has been purposely concealed from the many. True educators who aim to produce the best possible regime should attempt to inspire correct taste by means of introducing the few to the study of literature, for it is a “contagion which affects communities and the whole generation and if the study even to idolatry of wise and learned men can be as it has been the object of this sympathy in lieu of war, Antimasonry, or Commercial bubbles so much the better for the state” (EL 1:216).

He says in his lecture “Shakespear,” “good writing and brilliant discourse are perpetual allegories” (EL 1:290). The best books are, for Emerson, like fables, fairy

tales, or allegories in that they have morals that speak salutary myths to the many and reveal deeper secrets to the few. As he says in his lecture "Chaucer," he counts as the best writers those who read most carefully their precursors. The ancients, Plato, Plutarch, and Cicero, not to mention Montaigne, often quoted poets and creators of fables as one might quote scripture, for "a single clause, often a single word" precludes argument since the words of the poets contained "something divine, something of strict inspiration."⁴¹ To be a good writer is thus, for Emerson, to be a good reader. It is to place oneself in the stream of this uninterrupted flow of inspiration. It is to become a "teacher of mankind" who speaks "not his own words, but the words of some God" (EL 1:273). The best writers, thus, compose works that are "Janus faced and look to the future and the past." "There never was an original writer," he writes, but "Each is a link an endless chain. . . . And the nobler is the truth or sentiment concerned the less important becomes the question of authorship" (EL 1:284-85). It does not trouble the lover of truth, therefore, where the ideas have come from: "Every great man, as Homer, Milton, Bacon, and Aristotle, necessarily takes up into himself all the wisdom that his current in his time. It is only an inventor who can use the inventions of others" (EL 1:285).

⁴¹ In "Quotation and Originality," Emerson writes, "There is no pure originality. All minds quote" (W 8:170). And, "Next to the originator of a good sentence is the first quoter of it. Many will read the book before one thinks of quoting a passage" (W 8:182). And, "We are as much informed of a writer's genius by what he selects as by what he originates. We read the quotation with his eyes, and find a new and fervent sense" (W 8:185).

CHAPTER 4
EMERSON'S COLERIDGE

Obscurity and the Asthmatic Reader

The world in which I exist is another world indeed, but not to come.

—Coleridge (qtd. in *Emerson's Journal* 3: 371)

It is a familiar expedient of brilliant writers, and not less of witty talkers, the device of ascribing their own sentence to an imaginary person, in order to give it weight. . . . It is a curious reflex effect of this enhancement of our thought by citing it from another, that many men can write better under a mask than for themselves.

—Emerson, "Quotation and Originality" (W 8:187)

Society wishes to be amused. I do not wish to be amused. I wish that life should not be cheap, but sacred. I wish the days to be as centuries, loaded, fragrant.

—Emerson, "Considerations by the Way" (W 6:235)

Emerson learned much about the art of esotericism from sources both ancient and modern, from Plato, Plutarch, Bacon, and Montaigne, but he undoubtedly learned much about the relationships between writing, politics, religion, tradition, science, philosophy, and "the public" from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Friend*. Coleridge, a student of hermetic and esoteric traditions who understood the deep relationship between Plato and Bacon, made these traditions available to Emerson, who read *The Friend* in the early 1830s when he was formulating the rhetoric of his own political philosophy. While most think of Coleridge as primarily a poet and a Romantic, his prose works, *The Friend*, *The Statesman's Manual*, *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, *The Philosophical Lectures*, and *Aids to Reflection* (discussed in Chapter 6), all prove him to be an able and

well-versed political philosopher, and if the philosophers have not recognized this, Emerson surely did.

Coleridge's *The Friend* was originally published serially for a select number of subscribers, but Emerson read it as a three-volume collection of essays.¹ Emerson's copy of *The Friend*, housed at the Houghton Library at Harvard, is a much-marked book. This chapter will look closely at *The Friend*, at those passages Emerson marked and those he did not, in order to discover what Emerson learned about prudence and the practice of political philosophy from Coleridge.

One goal of *The Friend* is to teach the lesson that good intentions do not necessarily translate into proper ends, or that the new is rarely better than the old and established. In order to teach this political and philosophical lesson in the latter two-thirds of *The Friend*, Coleridge had first to prepare his proper readers, or, as Victoria Myers notes in "Coleridge's *The Friend*: An Experiment in Rhetorical Theory," *The Friend*'s primary concern is "the problem of maintaining (or creating) a thoughtful and responsible audience" (9). Jerome Christensen, in "The Method of *The Friend*," argues that the "professed aim" of *The Friend* was "to refer men's opinions to and anchor men's behavior in their absolute principles." This was, Christensen writes, "the central project of Coleridge's career as philosopher, moralist, and social critic" (11). Hazlitt commented, however, that Coleridge's text was nothing but an "enormous title-page, the longest and most tiresome Prospectus that ever was written" (qtd. in Coleman 3).

The Friend, which was immediately met with charges of obscurity, begins by discoursing at great length on issues of prudence, pious frauds, and the relationship

¹ See Deirdre Coleman's *Coleridge and The Friend (1809-1810)* for details about the publishing history of *The Friend*.

between the writer and the reading public. Coleridge retorts that the charge of obscurity matters as little as the charge of dullness, for only poor readers are apt to call dull what they cannot understand—or what was not meant for them. However, “if the author has presented his bill of fare at the portal,” as Coleridge does in this first essay, “the reader has himself only to blame” for his incomprehension (10). Instead, then, of going against “worldly prudence” and being charged with presumptuousness, Coleridge announces his aim to entertain, but he seeks only to amuse “a small portion of the reading public.” This task of amusing, he notes, allows him to relax the principles of moral obligation, since he does not write for the edification of the many, “which could have nothing noble to remember, nothing desirable to anticipate” (10).

The first essay of *The Friend* begins with a quote from Petrarch’s *De Vita Solitaria*. (As the editor’s footnote mentions, this quotation is not exact: it contains surreptitious variations and omissions.) The quotation speaks of helping the struggling, counseling the doubtful, giving light to the blind, hope to the despondent, and refreshment to the weary: “These are indeed great things, if they be accomplished,” Coleridge adds. The manipulated quotation from Petrarch, which Coleridge takes as the motto for the plan of *The Friend*, speaks of not prescribing a law for others but merely setting forth “the Law of my own Mind.” Coleridge compares his task in *The Friend* to the sage’s in Benedetto Stay’s “Fable of the Madning Rain,” for he is attempting to awaken his friends to forgotten truths. In the fable, set in the golden age when cities and citizens were closer to perfection, a sage tells his fellow citizens that his dæmon has warned him about a heavy rain soon to fall. The spirit of madness would possess whomever the rain fell on, and not only them but also their children and their children’s

children. When it was clear that no one would heed his warnings, the sage took to a cave. When he came out after the rain had fallen, he was horrified to find that all honor, freedom, sanity, and community had disappeared from the world. Soon enough his fellow citizens began harassing him, calling him a worthless idler and a dangerous meddler. Persecuted and alone in an insane world, he dove into the maddening liquid. "Never was a finer Tale for a satire," Coleridge quips (note 1, 9).

The second essay begins with an untraced, perhaps spurious, motto from Erasmus comparing a reader sitting down to a book with a visitor sitting down to a banquet. A well-behaved visitor recognizes the care his host has expended in preparations and politely passes on (*urbane dissimulant*) those dishes he has no taste for, yet he commends them others. No one could suffer a guest whose only intention was to find fault. There are also readers, this "Erasmus" writes, who condemn works they have never read. It is infamy, this motto states, to abuse a thing about which one is utterly ignorant. The general reader, Coleridge notes, expects a certain amount of information to accompany his amusement, but the "well-ordered minds" of "a lesser Public" who possess "the love of knowledge" do not read out "of mere curiosity" but instead read to become wiser or better, not to get more information (14-15). Coleridge announces that his intention is not "to convey instruction merely, but fundamental instruction"; it is to kindle his reader's torch concerning "the most important questions of Politics, Morality, and Religion." Coleridge cannot fulfill his intention "without demanding from the Reader THOUGHT sometimes, and ATTENTION generally"; both of these require "a most difficult and laborious Effort" (16-17).

The third essay is a (faux) letter responding to a (fictional) reader's complaint concerning the obscurity of *The Friend*. In this letter, Coleridge notes that he is aware of the obstacles that face one whose "avowed object" is to refer men to "PRINCIPLES or fundamental truths" (19). However, to ascend this steep hill and reach its heights, one must first undergo the drudgery of the climb. Coleridge must assume the mantle of dullness, difficulty, and obscurity, and must demand patience from his reader, by placing "all the driest and least attractive Essays" at the beginning. Only those who have undergone their discipline can make the ascent. Coleridge attributes his arcane, obscure style and plan for his periodical essays to having confined his reading to the ancients and to such eloquent writers as Hooker, Bacon, Milton, and Jeremy Taylor, whose marches are stately but their evolutions difficult (20). Though Coleridge claims a willingness to "correct" his "fault," he will not sacrifice his "judgment to the desire of being immediately popular, as to cast my sentences in the French moulds, or affect a style which an ancient critic would have deemed purposely invented for persons troubled with asthma to read, and for those to comprehend who labour under the more pitiable asthma of a short-witted intellect" (20).

Coleridge will not descend from the rarefied air to please those whose habits are formed by reading novels. He knows that even if he were to alter his style, his essays would still not prove "agreeable to the majority of what is called the reading public," which maintains an obstinate aversion to intellectual effort (and is contemptuous of writers who demand it) (21-22). To attempt to solicit the attention of the debilitated majority "would be no less absurd than to recommend exercise with the dumb bells, as the only mode of cure, to a patient paralytic in both arms." He hopes, though, that his

"lucubrations" might find their way toward "a sufficient number of meditative minds" (22). Coleridge ends this "letter" with a "prophecy" of Simon Grynæus, prefixed to Ficinus's translation of Plato. (Emerson marked this passage in his copy.) This "prophecy" notes that "the *sweet Baits* of Literature" have replaced "the more austere and disciplinary branches of philosophy . . . even by the learned" (23). This fact, "if not corrected in time, will occasion worse consequences than even barbarism did in the times of our forefathers." The barbarous "prudent saleable popular style of composition" is only capable of "decoying the minds of men," making readers who knows nothing think they "knows *all about* almost everything" (24).

The fourth essay begins with an invented motto which notes that one cannot be suspected of "presumption" if one sides with antiquity concerning nature, reason, truth, and moral purity. In this essay, Coleridge continues his war on lazy, bored readers whose "mental yawns" makes them deaf to serious thinking and writing. If such boredom (or a *hiatus oscitans*, a yawning gap) occurs when reading "a work of known authority and established fame" (which may contain *hiatus lacrymabilis*, lamentable gaps), most will fault themselves, but when reading a contemporary most will pronounce the writer "insufferably dull and obscure," unintelligible, or a purveyor of "metaphysical jargon" (25-26). Coleridge argues that lazy, asthmatic readers cannot charge him with arrogance since "no man can rightfully be condemned without reference to some definite law." Certainly he may, he announces, dare "to dissent from the opinions of great authorities" and "the general opinion concerning the true value of certain authorities deemed great," but Coleridge claims he is too modest to *assert*, arrogantly or abusively, openly contrary opinions without annexing some sense of their formation. Nor can he be guilty of

“Warburtonian arrogance” which insults those who deny the truth of his ideas (29). Nor can he be charged with presumption, for he is not ignorant of his subject (as many “illiterate perpetrator[s] of ‘the Age of Reason’” are).

In the fifth essay, which begins with mottos by Quintilian and Augustine, the first speaking to the impossibility of combining honor and baseness or the best and worst designs, and the second noting that a knowledge of truth is equal to the task of discerning and refuting falsity, Coleridge discourses on pious frauds. (There is a large, smeared thumbprint in the margin by this passage in Emerson’s copy.) While there are “numerous artifices, by which austere truths are to be softened down into palatable falsehoods,” Coleridge notes, he especially dislikes pious frauds as they were used by the Christian Fathers, who asserted “the lawfulness of Deceit for a good purpose.” While St. Paul might have found it necessary to employ “different arguments to men of different capacities and prejudices,” the necessary prudence of this counterfeit *koine* “to deceive the enemies of the faith” in contemporary Christendom seems outdated as “the records of History become[] more extensive,” and this has served to “paganize” Christianity, turning it into a superstition (37-38). Coleridge feels it is important to place immediately before his readers “in the fullest and clearest light, the whole question of moral obligation respecting the communication of Truth” in an attempt to obviate any apprehension of his incaution or insincerity. By proving strict adherence to “the *Letter* of the moral law,” he can more completely “reconcile the law with prudence; thus securing a purity in the principle without mischief from the practice” (39).

Coleridge’s intention, then, is not to deceive, even if he conceals from some what is revealed to others. He will not use dissimulation as men in power do who dupe others

for gain, out of expediency, or for the love of duping. He will not condescend to this practice, for he intends to exert his readers' faculties toward "noble energies" (41). Coleridge, displaying his "doctrinal adhesion," is less interested in *verbal* truth than in *moral* truth. He is no "enemy to free enquiry of the boldest kind," or of doubts concerning "the existence of an intelligent first cause" buried "in the notes of one poem, or placed doubtfully as one of two or three possible hypothesis, in the opening of another poem," as long as "the enquiry be conducted with that seriousness, which naturally accompanies the love of truth, and that it is evidently intended for the perusal of those only, who may be presumed to be capable of weighing the arguments" (42). The duty of an honest man is not always veracity, for truth can be more dangerous as falsehood (42). Even the true and exact enunciation of Scripture can have negative consequences if the time and place are inappropriate (43). Unlike the Enlighteners, Coleridge does not believe "the law of universal reason commands the communication of truth independently of consequences." All that "conscience, or effective reason" commands is an "*adequate* notion of the thing spoken," when this is "practicable" (43).

The sixth essay's motto, perhaps by Anaxarchos yet ascribed to Heraclitus, notes that knowledge is beneficial to a man of sound judgment but not to one without the wisdom to understand how to communicate truth to the right audiences at the right time and place. For Coleridge, moral law "permits an inadequate communication of unsophisticated truths, on the condition that it alone is practicable, and binds us to silence when neither is in our power." Coleridge's task is to ascertain the proper time and place to convey "a right though inadequate notion" and when it is impracticable to convey a right notion (44). "Conscience demands" that one convey a right though inadequate

notion if the intention is to provide the truth. If the inadequacy of the formulation leads to error, this is the fault of the recipient, not the communicator. Coleridge adds the proviso that this potential error ought not to pervert the "imperfect truth" (45).

As examples of inadequate conveyances, Coleridge says that if a barbarian is told of an Infinite Being, yet not of His moral attributes, he is likely to conceive of something akin to a Moloch or a Baal. He compares this to a deist removing the qualities of love, justice, choice, power, and intelligence from the Deity: both notions lead to a perversion of truth. One might, however, convey a right though inadequate notion if "the error occasioned be greatly outweighed by the importance of the truth communicated." Coleridge criticizes the Encyclopædists for trumpeting truths that dispelled the superstitions of the many and caused a loss of faith in God, tradition, and hope. Their dangerous truths, conveyed in the hopes of transforming men into gods, were but cunning demonic deceptions, opening men's eyes to the fact that they were little more than beasts. With this enlightened knowledge, men first acted like beasts, then suffered themselves to be treated like beasts by their governments (46-47).

One might also convey a right though inadequate notion if "the error foreseen shall not be of a kind to prevent or impede the after acquirement of that knowledge which will remove it" (47). This is to follow the method of nature, which often instructs us by causing us to mistake reflections for the thing itself, but the detection of this illusion leads us to knowledge: "out of the ashes of the error rises a new flower of knowledge." Truth conveyed by this method helps us "not only see," but enables us "to discover by what means we see," unlike the methods of "our hurrying enlighteners and revolutionary amputators" (47).

Coleridge then turns to examining when it is impracticable to convey a right notion, or to situations that oblige us “to abstain from the attempt—oblige us not to convey falsehood under the pretext of *saying* truth.” If one’s auditor has a natural impediment—is ignorant or deranged—the conveyance of either truth or falsity hardly has any consequences, but if one’s auditors have certain moral impediments, one must exert extreme care “in the matter, the manner, and the time” of communication. To abstain, or remain silent, seems the only option when facing ignorance or prejudices. Neither conveying an adequate nor a right notion of the truth should be attempted publicly, but even the private attempt “to procure nominal proselytes” may only result in each having “a different, and all a false, conception of those notions that were to be conveyed for their truth’s sake alone” (48). To choose unfit auditors is to be guilty, no matter one’s hopes or intention, of voluntarily communicating falsehood (49). While there can be no ill consequences “from the publication of any truth, under the observance of the moral conditions stated above,” outside of these moral conditions, many pernicious effects arise. Coleridge compares this to a scene in *Tom Jones* when Blifil is told of Tom’s riotous joy during his benefactor’s illness, but the one who conveys this message neglects to say that this joy arose upon hearing the benefactor pronounced out of danger. Coleridge also compares this to public scenes of mobs being directed to yell for the rights of man. Such agitators are telling truths but in the service of falsehood (49-50).

The seventh essay begins with another probably spurious motto. (In his copy, Emerson corrects the spelling in the Latin text.) This untraced letter of Rudolph von Langen (1438-1519) to Rudolph Agricola (1442-1485) asks if learned persons are “to guard against the herd of promiscuous Readers. . . . Can we bid our *books* be silent in the

presence of the unworthy?" To use dead languages limits one's audience, but to use the "native" and "sensual" language of the time and place is to "divulge the secrets of Minerva to the ridicule of blockheads." This can be avoided by abstaining from appealing to "bad passion and low appetites" and by confining oneself "to a strictly consequent method of reasoning." This letter notes: "To have written innocently, and for wise purposes, is all that can be required of us: the event lies with the Reader" (51-52). A second motto, this one rightly attributable to Petrarch, compares words to "inefficacious medicines." When administered "to minds agitated with manifold passions," they are little more than charms muttered for bodily ailments; however, since "the diseases of the mind are invisible, invisible must the remedies likewise be. Those who have been entrapped by false opinions are to be liberated by convincing truths: that thus having imbibed the poison through the ear they may receive the antidote by the same channel" (52). These mottos lead Coleridge to platonize about the question of how the moral rules for the conveyance of truth apply

to the most important mode of communication . . . in which one man may utter his thoughts to myriads of men at the same time, and to myriads of myriads at various times and through successions of generations? How does it apply to authors, whose foreknowledge assuredly does not inform them who, or how many, or of what description their Readers will be? How do these rules apply to books, which once published, are as likely to fall in the way of the incompetent as of the judicious, and will be fortunate indeed if they are not many times looked at through the thick mists of ignorance, or amid the glare of prejudice and passion? (53)

Coleridge continues, borrowing by anticipation from Channing, Emerson, and Strauss:

If the Author have clearly and rightly established in his own mind the class of readers, to which he means to address his communications; and if both in this choice, and in the particulars of the manner and matter of his work, he conscientiously observes all the conditions which reason and conscience have been shewn to dictate, in relation to those for whom the work was designed; he

will, in most instances, have effected his design and realized the desired circumspection. (54)

In a book, Coleridge asserts, claims to truth will either be self-evident or might become evident after a set of deductions that either confirm or oppose authorized opinions. But some books merely examine truths “still under trial (*adhuc sub lite*).” None of these cases can bring ill consequences if one appeals to the understanding and reason and not the base appetites. Those whose method enacts the most careful design do not need to fear ill consequences, for their “severe thinking” is “neither an easy nor an amusing employment”:

The reader, who would follow a close reasoner to the summit and absolute principle of any one important subject, has chosen a Chamois-hunter for his guide. Our guide will, indeed, take us the shortest way, will save us many a wearisome and perilous wandering, and warn us of many a mock road that had formerly led himself to the brink of chasms and precipices, or at best in an idle circle to the spot from whence he started. But he cannot carry us on his shoulders: we must strain our own sinews, as he has strained his; and make firm footing on the smooth rock for ourselves, by the blood of toil from our own feet. (55)

Those whose desires are of the body can never be the friend of a real teacher or discoverer of truth (56-57). Only the carefully instructed initiate can ascend philosophy’s heights.

Prudence as Method

A thought would destroy most persons.

—Emerson (TN 1.159)

Sift the wheat, frighten away the lighter souls. . . . Let those come who cannot but come.

—Emerson, “The Scholar” (W 10:272)

The third volume (or “Section the Second: On the Grounds of Morals and Religion, and the Discipline of the Mind Requisite for a True Understanding of the

Same”), containing Coleridge’s “Essay on Method,” is the one Emerson quotes from most in his private and public writings.² While Coleridge in the preceding sections discussed “the principles of our duty as citizens, or morality as applied to politics,” this section focuses on the indivisibility of morality and religion (409). For Coleridge, it is possible but ultimately incorrect and a “mockery” to attempt to distinguish the objects of morality and religion, to call morality “the religion we owe to things and persons of this life, and religion our morality toward God and the permanent concerns of our souls” (409). He despises modern “prejudice” or “profanation” that would substitute “worldly prudence” “for the laws of reason and conscience” (410-11). Coleridge traces back the origin of this split to a time and a text (William Sedgwick’s *Justice upon the Armie Remonstrance*, 1648) when truth was more important than worldly prudence—the time of the English Civil Wars during the reign of Charles the First.

In *English Traits*, Emerson recalls during his first visit to England in 1833 asking Coleridge about this particular passage of several pages quoted in the first essay of the second section of *The Friend* (all of which are much marked in Emerson’s copy) (W 5:15-16). This passage condemns both Charles and his enemies for their political machinations, their worldly prudence, and their disturbance of “the natural order of things.” Emerson asked Coleridge if this “extract” was a “veritable quotation,” for he found it excellent, but Coleridge informed him it was quite “filtered” and was more interesting than the original. Coleridge uses this misquoted passage concerning the

² A note in Emerson’s hand inserted inside the front cover of the third volume of his copy reads, “Mr. Coleridge distinguishes all his writings the 3 vol. of the *Friend* from p. 67 to 265 with 50 or 60 pages from the two former volumes; & the 2d vol of his *Biographia Literaria*.”

disturbed relation between royalty, the nobles, the state, and religion to elaborate on “speculative minds”—those rare men of genius and talent who shape civilizations.

The notion of speculative minds, he writes, no longer carries its “legitimate sense” of those who take “an interest in truth for their TRUTH’S SAKE,” but now signifies “a practical schemer” whose only interest is speculating about new ways to attain wealth or power (413-14). Coleridge is careful here, as he is in *Aids to Reflection*, to define his terms. He distinguishes between genius, talent, sense, and cleverness. The man of talent always seeks some object: “His ends may be peculiar; but his ends are conventional, and common to the mass of mankind” (415). In a passage that will resound in Emerson’s *Essays and Representative Men* Coleridge writes, “The records of biography,” however, “furnish ample proof that genius, in the higher degree, acts as a preservative” against men of mere talent and this kind of speculative mind.

Emerson also marked the passages where Coleridge compares those speculative minds wherein “the imagination and preconstructive power have taken a scientific or philosophic direction,” such as in Plato, Kepler, Milton, Boyle, Newton, Leibnitz, and Berkley, “gifted masters of the divining rod.” They are no ordinary miners. A certain number of these minds are “necessary to a cultivated state of society,” but “nature herself has provided against any too great increase in this class of her productions” (416). Inside the back cover of his copy of *The Friend*, Emerson made a note about Coleridge’s connection of these speculative minds to an old miner Coleridge claims to have known. This miner remembered a time of guilds “when every trade was a mystery and had its own guardian saint,”

when the detail of each art and trade (like the oracles of the prophets, interpretable in a double sense) was ennobled in the eyes of its professors by being spiritually

improved into symbols and mementos of all doctrines and all duties, and every craftsman had, as it were, two versions of his Bible, one in the common language of the country, another in the acts, object, and products of his own particular craft. (417)

Coleridge follows this Masonic description with an anecdote: He said to the old miner that it must have crossed his mind that the products of his labor would be transformed into instruments used to reap the harvest, and so he was protecting the harvest-man. This miner answered, saying that though he could determine by experience the translation of ore into iron, he could not prophesize what would happen to it after that. It could just as easily “become a thievish pick-lock, a murderer’s dirk, a slave’s collar, or the woodman’s axe, the feeding ploughshare, the defender’s sword, or the mechanic’s tool” (418). The moral? No matter how carefully or cautiously one creates, one cannot finally control how the creation will be used. Philosophers’ truths, however, can only become thievish tools if fashioned incautiously.

In the postscript to this essay, Emerson marks Coleridge’s definition of “genius.” Coleridge gives genius a “Romantic” definition, so that it is not only that “faculty which *adds* to the existing stock of power, and knowledge by new views, new combinations,” but is also “originality in intellectual construction,” and the “actuating principle” that allows carrying out “the freshness and feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood” (419). While this would seem, according to academic common sense, central to Coleridge, it is not. Careful in other places to distinguish genius from “talent” (“the comparative facility of acquiring, arranging, and applying the stock furnished by others and already existing in books or other conservatories of intellect”), which requires no morality, and “sense” (a “balance of faculties” that makes judgment healthy), Coleridge seems most interested in cleverness. Cleverness is not the “low word” of Dr. Johnson,

but is closer to an arsenal of stratagems. Cleverness is “a comparative readiness in the invention and use of means, for the realizing of objects and ideas—often of such ideas, which the man of genius only could have originated, and which the clever man perhaps neither fully comprehends nor adequately appreciates, even at the moment that he is prompting or executing the machinery of their accomplishment” (420).

In the second essay of the second section, using a quotation from Cicero’s *De Divinatione*,³ Coleridge hints that he seeks to speak to the few and intends to activate rhetorically, almost subliminally, those who can discern, understand, and predict the future despite the occultations of the Enlightenment (428, 430). He speaks to those who do not rely on the evidence of the senses, who do not need miracles, who understand “spiritual truths” (431), who have enthusiasm (from the Greek, *enthousiasmos*: “the influence of the divinity such as was supposed to take possession of the priest during the performance of the services at the altar” [432]), and who revere the “invisible” (440). (Emerson marks the passages in this chapter that mention Swedenborg in this company.)

In the third essay of this section, “On the Origin and Progress of the Sect of Sophists in Greece,” Coleridge details the split in the logos between philosophers and sophists. Unlike Pythagoras (the first to name himself a philosopher), Plato, and Aristotle, the Sophists (Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus) were not lovers of wisdom but were “wholesale and retail dealer[s] in wisdom,” or “*wisdom-monger[s]*.” Plato and Aristotle, Coleridge notes, heaped blame upon them, calling them venders or men who hire themselves out or put themselves up for auctions (436). The motives of these

³ In translation: “Now I am aware of no people, however refined and learned or however savage and ignorant, which does not think that signs are given of future events, and that certain persons can recognize those signs and foretell events before they occur” (1.1.2).

itinerant sellers of eloquence were base. These “*sleight-of-word jugglers*” had skills that Plato and Aristotle admired, yet Plato censures them, in the *Timæus*, for their itinerancy, and thus for their bad citizenship (437). It was the Sophist’s immoral objects, their base motives, and their prostitution of genius, Coleridge notes, not their talents, which brought condemnation upon them.

Similar to Montaigne’s apparent condemnation of sophistry in “Of the Vanity of Words,” Coleridge describes the coincidence between the arrival of Sophists to a *polis* and civil unrest or political chaos. Appearing in popular republics, the Sophists initiated a “passion for military glory and political preponderance, which may well be called the bastard and the parricide of liberty” (438). The traveling Sophists brought news of other states, regimes, and regions, creating desires previously unnatural to isolated city-states. They intoxicated the citizens with new political desires, and these intoxications caused “the destruction of the Athenian constitution by the ascendancy of its democratic element” (438). Selling their services to the vain and ambitious youth and the rich—who thought wealth a substitute for authority—the Sophists contributed to “stable and salutary influence” being replaced by “the arts of popularity” (438-39).

While the Sophists, Coleridge writes, were men of cleverness, they, like the Enlighteners, had talent but no sense or genius. Their schemes demand “the people themselves should be degraded into a populace” (439). As wars and the luxuries bought by war increased, desire increased, and so did restlessness. The Sophists undermined “all fixed principles, whether grounded on reason, religion, law, or antiquity,” as they submitted all things “to the criterion of the mere understanding, disguising or concealing” that the understanding applies only to objects of the senses (439). Enlightened modern

sophists use the same scheme. They proclaim themselves advocates of a new truth.

However, Coleridge writes,

At all events, the minds of men were to be sensualized; and even if the arguments themselves failed, yet the principles so attacked were to be brought into doubt by the mere frequency of hearing *all* things doubted, and the most sacred of all now openly denied, and now insulted by sneer and ridicule. For by the constitution of our nature, as far as it is *human* nature, so awful is truth, that as long as we have faith in its attainability and hopes of its attainment, there exists no bribe strong enough to tempt us wholly and permanently from our allegiance. (439)

For Coleridge, there can be no morality in a world without the dark mysteries of religion—without the invisible. Social order must be based on something higher than and unavailable to the senses. When the invisible is denied, we are left merely with “an ever-shifting perspective” (441). Without this faith in something higher, there is no basis for morality, laws, custom, or traditional social divisions, yet the Sophists sought “to separate ethics from the faith in the Invisible” and to undermine the validity of all laws (441, 443). Because of this, morality became base worldly prudence, and Greece crumbled. By avoiding both the Sophists and the democratic element, Rome rose to power (442).

The Sophists inaugurated “the epoch of division and separation.” When the “spirit of philosophy reigns in the learned and highest class,” and religion reigns in all classes, there is a social unity concerning the object of pursuit; without this, there is only selfishness and competitiveness. True social order cannot be maintained by contract. There must be an awful Law to found and maintain all modes and orders. The Jacobins of the French Revolution, like the Sophists, did not reckon, in their modern rational calculations, the cost of throwing light on what for ages had remained dark. They thought of old laws and customs as mere superstitious that could safely be eliminated. They did not understand the cost of undermining social and hereditary privileges with an

ideology of natural rights, of substituting history and science for faith, of denigrating traditions that linked generations and provided noble feelings. They did not understand the cost of “general illumination,” of popularized learning and philosophy, and of “the plebification of knowledge.” Lacking the prudence that comes from genius and cleverness, they failed to draw the line of demarcation between the many and the few, the line that all wise men have always known must be maintained: “A true philosophy in the learned class is essential to a true religious feeling in all classes” (447).

In his “Essay on Method” (essays IV-XI), Coleridge discusses how the prudent and clever genius employs a rhetoric characterized by “the unpremeditated and evidently habitual *arrangement* of his words, grounded on the habit of foreseeing, in each integral part, or (more plainly) in every sentence, the whole that he intends to communicate. However, irregular and desultory his talk, there is *method* in the fragments” (449). Method allows one to form the understanding, to communicate “the imperishableness of a spiritual nature” (449-50), and to contemplate the relations of things so that, unlike those without Method, one is not subjugated to the seemingly chaotic flow of events and images (451). As Myers notes, Method, for Coleridge, “emancipates the educated man from time—from the mere succession of images and events” (16).

The uneducated, who do not possess Method, must submit to the understanding, but the educated man—the scholar—contemplates things rationally in their relations (Coleridge, *Friend* 451). Method, for Coleridge, is similar to what Bacon calls the Initiative method. Method (Greek: *methodos*) indicates “*a way, or path of Transit*” (457). It always already knows where it is going. It is prudence itself (Gk: *phronesis*, Lt: *prudentia*), for it understands beforehand, proleptically, what is to be done or not done,

and whether what ought to be done should be done openly or secretly. Drawing heavily on Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*, Coleridge notes that Plato, according to (among others) Aristotle, held that philosophizing rightly could only follow the contemplation of things divine—the Law, the Supreme Being, God, or first causes (see Aristotle's *Nicomachian Ethics* Book I:4-12). Theory, the Fine Arts, and the Sciences all depend, for the Platonist, on the knowledge of Law, which alone provides "Power and Prophecy, decisive Experiment, and, lastly, a scientific method" (470). Coleridge writes, "Alienated from this (intuition shall we call it? or steadfast faith?) ingenious men may produce schemes, conducive to the peculiar purposes of particular sciences, but no scientific system" (460).

However, Coleridge writes, this is never discussed openly in Plato's published work; thus, Aristotle must have received this teaching orally, "or have found it in the *ágrapha dógmata*, the private text books or manuals constructed by Plato's select disciples, and intelligible to these only who like themselves had been entrusted with the esoteric (interior or unveiled) doctrines of Platonism" (461). Plato's Method—the true and esoteric Method—therefore, Coleridge concludes, involves keeping certain teachings in reserve, not profaning them by publishing them or by publishing them without the veil of difficulty or obscurity. This Platonist Method, which is—or ought to be—philosophy itself, presents itself publicly under the guise of investigating the truth, but this *a posteriori* investigation is the prudent or exoteric explanation of "the results of a more scientific process to those, for whom the knowledge of the results was alone requisite and sufficient" (461). The published texts of Platonist philosophy, whose Method *The Friend* follows and advocates to its audience, are composed merely of hints and indications. Their esoteric truths exist between the lines of the exoteric and initiative surface for those

with ears to hear to discover. No matter what exists on the surface, the Platonist Method seeks that unconditional and absolute ground which exists beneath all that exists conditionally. (Emerson marks these passages and quotes them in *Nature*, yet attributes the ideas not to Coleridge but to Plato.)

Method seeks a system to understand the Law (461). This Law—which founds states, maintains social order, and establishes morality—is religious, and for Coleridge, the true wisdom the Platonist Method teaches is that both philosophy and science are supplements to religion, which is the “scientific” investigation of the whole, of Being, or of God (463). No enigma—scientific or spiritual—can be solved without reference to the Law (471). The impatient and unphilosophical Enlighteners cannot see the whole and, therefore, can only recommend isolated solutions to isolated problems.

The “tortuous and labyrinthine” Platonist Method is less concerned with establishing “any particular truth,” or solving any particular problems, than it is in attempting “to exemplify the art of METHOD” and “to remove the obstacles, the continuance of which is preclusive of all truth” (472). It means to educate the intellect “by awakening the principle and *method* of self-development” (473), or, as Emerson will transform it, it is a process of culture that teaches self-reliance. Indeed, one can only make sense of the parts if one’s method, “or self-organizing PURPOSE,” is to understand the whole (499), or if one has a “pre-cogitation” of the whole (475). Method means to “excite some master IDEA” and lead “to some LAW,” whether the research is in physics or philosophy (478). The problem with modern science—Coleridge takes as his examples those that also interested Emerson: electricity and magnetism—is that it leads to inventions but not to any idea, law, or method (479). It proceeds largely by accidents

in its attempts to solve particular difficulties brought on by selfish motives—such as the circumnavigation of the globe to increase a nation's wealth and power—instead of virtuous ones. To a man of method, however, even the inventions produced by these base means and ends—such as the compass—offer a presentiment of the “intimate connection with all the great agencies of nature” and “a revelation, in ciphers, the key to which is still wanting” (480).

Coleridge sets himself in political and philosophical opposition to the spirit of the eighteenth century, which produced the French Revolution and initiated the dismissal of Plato from the provinces of philosophy. Plato, Coleridge baconizes, argues by induction, and Coleridge condemns those sons of science who claim to be Bacons' heirs for positioning Bacon against Plato. Though Coleridge censures Bacon (exactly as Emerson will) for “his courtly,—alas! his servile, prostitute, and mendicant—ambition,” Coleridge is confident that Bacon's method is “radically one and the same system” as Plato's (486-87). Myers argues that Coleridge's attempt to reconcile “the claims of the senses with the claims of the mind” is a strategy that attempts “a rapprochement between terms thought by his contemporaries to be in opposition” (20). Bacon's “contemplation of nature is Platonic throughout,” writes Coleridge, and differs only in the mode: Bacon is more “dogmatic, i.e. assertory,” while Plato is “tentative, and (to adopt the Socratic phrase) *obstetric*” (482). Plato treats the ideal pole; Bacon, the material pole; Plato, the intellect alone and Bacon, the “signatures of nature” (492). Plato's “LIVING LAWS” are identical to the “ideas” Bacon perceives in nature. Both seek “the Eternal Essence” of “the divine mind” by means of a dialectical discipline that purifies the mind and raises it “to the contemplation of Ideas” (492-93). Bacon, whom Coleridge calls “the British

Plato,” is a prudent experimenter who approaches the “*prudens questio*” already possessing half the knowledge he seeks (489). Bacon’s experiments test ideas. Sincere inquiry is always “pre-admonished” and knows its boundaries (490). It is grounded in “pure reason, the spirit, *lumen siccum*, nous, *pious noeron*, intellectual intuition, &c. &c.” (491). When reason is the guide, the path of experiment leads to transcendent things—to eternal laws, not earthly, man-made ones.

Without Method, there can be no education that leads to personal or social perfection. There is a difference between civilization and cultivation, for only the latter seeks truth in its moral aspect. Those who seek without regard for moral nature or respect for the religious, “which is indispensable, both as guide and object to the just formation of the human BEING,” will always remain outside the truth and may bring ruin upon the state. Method, informed by “the religious instinct,” writes Coleridge, quoting Shakespeare, finds “tongues in trees; books in the running streams; sermons in stones: and good (*that is, some useful end answering to some good purpose*) in every thing” (497). Education must begin with “the cultivation of the moral sense” and “the principle of obedience” (500).

The Platonist Method allows one to “reduce Phænomena to Principles”; it is “the self-unravelling clue, which alone can securely guide him to the conquest of the former” (511). Unlike the pure calculative rationality of the Enlighteners, these wise principles are characterized by the feeling that there is “something ineffably greater” than one’s “individual nature” (514). The “idols of the sense,” creations of our sensualized abstractions to which we are slaves, fall with the apprehension of Being or God—the Law of all things (518)—which provides the only “sure anchorage in the storm,” and “the

satisfactory solution of all the contradictions of human nature, of the whole riddle of the world" (524).

Emerson's Prudence

So you have undertaken to solve the problem of the world. . . . You will always find those who think they know what is your duty far better than you know it yourself, so go to the Sunday School if they bid you; there's a good boy.

—Emerson (J 4:64)

It is a rule that holds in economy as well as in hydraulics, that you must have a source higher than your tap.

—Emerson, "The Fortune of the Republic" (W 11:395)

In skating over thin ice our safety is in our speed.

—Emerson, "Prudence" (W 2:222).

Though Emerson's essay "Prudence" is no match for Coleridge's *The Friend*, Emerson, like Coleridge, distinguishes a prudent style of exposition from sophistry, or mere talent. Emerson's style throughout his corpus might seem circuitous, obscure, or contradictory to the asthmatic reader, but his style is a necessary part of the process of philosophy. Emerson notes that since his prudence is of the negative sort that he has as little "title to write on prudence" as he does "to write on poetry or holiness." As a political philosopher, Emerson aspires to wisdom, and his meditation on prudence proceeds like any philosopher's: not so much from experience—from a state already achieved—but from "aspiration and antagonism," or from wonder. "We paint those qualities which we do not possess," he writes (W 2:209).

A discourse on prudence, Emerson notes, is necessarily coarser than "fine lyric words of Love and Friendship," the topics of the two essays preceding "Prudence." Love and friendship are ideals, but prudence is a "virtue of the senses," the necessary and strategic art that mediates between the ideal and the actual. "It is," Emerson notes, "the

science of appearances" (W 2:210). In his reading and writing, Emerson constantly takes note of the presentation of truths, of how truths are revealed and concealed by the forms of their presentation. He knows that not all men are ready or able to receive truth, nor should truth be revealed to all. In his journals of 1835-38, he writes, that his democratic age is dull, "the majority wicked," society "flat & foolish" (JMN 5:194). However, to speak of truth in this "democratic" world, one must know and abide by rules of prudence. A prudent eloquence, one that "is the outmost action of the inward life," must accommodate itself to the times: "It moves matter after the laws of matter" (W 2:210).

Like those esoteric political philosophers who preceded him, Emerson acknowledges that the world of the senses is "a world of shows." One who is able to submit to the suffering the quest for wisdom demands, however, will come to recognize that the sensual world also "has a symbolical character." Like Coleridge, Emerson notes that true prudence is not dissembling with the intention to deceive for the purposes of gaining or maintaining power. True prudence is the recognition of "the co-presence of other laws" existing beneath the surface of the play of illusions. True prudence, or concealing, is, for Emerson, only "legitimate when it is the Natural History of the soul incarnate, when it unfolds the beauty of laws within the narrow scope of the senses" (W 2:210). It is the boundaries of the symbolic world, the world of surface and illusion, that set the limits for revealing truth, and it is within these boundaries that one learns what is forbidden and what is allowed.

For his "present purpose," Emerson notes it is sufficient to indicate three "degrees of proficiency in knowledge of the world." While there are certainly those living beneath these three classes, Emerson notes that one class lives "to the utility of the symbol,

esteeming health and wealth a final good.” These are, perhaps, the class of gentlemen; they have “common sense.” The “poet and artist and the naturalist and man of science” live “above this mark to the beauty of the symbol.” These men of taste, however, remain enchanted by the world of illusion. Only the third class, the wise men, “live above the beauty of the symbol to the beauty of the thing signified” and attain “spiritual perception” (W 2:210-11). Rarely does one traverse this scale, but it is possible that one might pitch a “tent on this sacred volcanic isle of nature” not with the intention “to build houses and barns” but simply to reverence “the splendor of the God which he sees bursting through each chink and cranny” (W 2:211).

Emerson distinguishes this telos of spiritual perception from the world of “base prudence,” of economy, common proverbs, and “devotion to matter.” Emerson likens sensual living to a disease, “a thickening of the skin until the vital organs are destroyed.” Political, philosophical, or economic attention merely to “the body and its wants” remains ignorant of all the higher ends of culture and only values means to sensual and temporary satisfaction. No one immersed in this world, though he “be a good wheel or pin,” can be a “cultivated man.” Emerson contrasts the “spurious prudence” of the senses with “true prudence,” which limits sensualism through its admission of “the knowledge of an internal and real world.” Once one has had this recognition, the world of shows opens itself to inspection: “the order of the world and the distribution of affairs and times, being studied with the co-perception of their subordinate place, will reward any degree of attention” (W 2:212).

However, prudence is not a simple scientific examination of things, looking for truth or facts, nor is it merely philosophical, using the dialectic in its quest for first

principles and knowledge of the whole. Prudence is rhetorical; it begins in the world of commonly held opinions—and learns how best to live in the world. As Aristotle teaches in the *Rhetoric*, one begins where one is and attempts to persuade one's audience as to what is good or evil, better or worse, possible or impossible, and so on. Emerson writes, "Prudence does not go behind nature and ask whence it is. It takes the laws of the world whereby man's being is conditioned, as they are, and keeps these laws that it may enjoy their proper good" (W 2:212). However, there are different "natural laws" for different ranks of people. As in most of his writings on social issues, Emerson holds to the idea of "to each his own" (what most misread as "democratic individualism") and to the natural rank ordering of people (which most do not read at all). He does not see much chance for social mobility—except by those true "individuals" who transcend all rank so that it does not matter from whence they began—since, unlike modern political philosophers, Emerson does not believe in chance or in the ability of the state to change human nature: "everything in nature, even motes and feathers, go by law and not by luck" (W 2:222). Yet each—even the political philosopher—must be "instructed by these petty experiences which usurp the hours and years," must learn the practical laws of economy (*oikonomos*—the art of the manager of the household) (W 2:213, 214). As Xenophon's Socrates teaches in the *Oeconomicus*, this art differs from the political or royal art only in the size of its realm.

Transferred from the vocabulary of practical wisdom to the vocabulary of the stratagem, prudence (Gk: *phronesis*) moves from meaning knowledge of what ought to be done or what ought not be done to a recognition of an enemy's stratagems and an

ability to keep one's enemy ignorant of one's own stratagems.⁴ Prudence (L: *prudencia*—a skill learned from experience) is related to *providentia*, or the foresight required of a statesman or general to predict the future or take precautions. A good strategist must also possess *prudencia ratio*—the ability to know whether an act ought to be done secretly or openly, by using force or persuasion. Emerson writes, “Some wisdom comes out of every natural and innocent action. . . . The application of means to ends insures victory and the songs of victory not less in a farm or a shop than in the tactics of party or of war” (W 2:214-15). Prudence for Emerson, like Coleridge, is about method, whether that is stacking firewood, executing a military campaign, or running the State (W 2:215). As Emerson is convinced that each must learn to be satisfied with his or her station in life, he counsels minding one's own business: “Let a man keep the law,—any law,—and his way will be strown with satisfactions”(W 2:215). One can be prudent whether one thinks the senses final or the soul as long as one follows the strict method and laws appropriate to each. Few, however, follow the laws of prudence or any of nature's laws, for in this impertinent age every hitherto eternal or holy law is taken as a myth to be vanquished by Reform, writes Emerson. Surveying this battlefield of politics, he writes, “We must call the highest prudence to counsel, and ask why health and beauty and genius should now be the exception rather than the rule of human nature?” (W 2:218).

The higher strains of prudence that Coleridge and Emerson are interested in, like rhetoric, are not confined to any one topic or virtue but must comprehend economy,

⁴ This is the kind of prudence Machiavelli openly codifies in his *Discourses* when he writes that “the commander of an army should always mistrust any manifest error which he sees the enemy commit, as it invariably conceals some stratagem. For it is not reasonable to suppose that men will be so incautious” (3:XLVIII:537).

politics, duty, heroism, and holiness. Its method is akin to ceremonial rhetoric more than deliberative, a rhetoric of praise and blame instead of persuasion and dissuasion, for, Emerson writes, "Prudence concerns the present time, persons, property, and existing forms," not the future (W 2:223). However, this prudent ceremonial rhetoric whose province is the present leads to contemplation of political things, for "in regard to disagreeable and formidable things, prudence does not consist in evasion or in flight, but in courage. He who wishes to walk in the most peaceful parts of life with any serenity must screw himself up to resolution" (W 2:223-24). The political philosopher, therefore, must descend into real relations of the city using rhetoric to do battle in a false age. With the proper rhetoric, combined with self-reliance or "entire self-possession," one will be undaunted by this task.

Emerson translates a Latin proverb, "In battles the eye is first overcome," but the self-possessed political philosopher and rhetor experiences no fear or trepidation, for he is assured that he sees further and better, and is able to read between the lines (W 2:224). He knows those secrets written on "a folded and sealed scrap of paper" that have floated "around the globe in a pine ship" are written for his eyes. They have arrived "amidst a swarming population" to admonish him

to integrate his being across all these distracting forces, and keep a slender human word among the storms, distances, and accidents that drive us hither and thither, and, by persistency, make the paltry force of one man reappear to redeem its pledge after months and years in the most distant climates. (W 2:222-23)

This prudent political philosopher with eyes to see and ears to hear must acquire a voice to speak out concerning virtue and vice, the honorable and dishonorable, the noble and base (topics of ceremonial rhetoric) as a kind of prolepsis of true political deliberation.

He must prepare the way. He must become a master of eloquence and become knowledgeable concerning the topics for persuasion and the ways of common sense.

Emerson writes, "Though your views are in straight antagonism to theirs, assume an identity of sentiment, assume that you are saying precisely that which all think, and in the flow of wit and love roll out your paradoxes in solid column, with not the infirmity of doubt. So at least shall you get an adequate deliverance" (W 2:225-26). This method of rhetoric, Emerson teaches, ought to "assume a consent and it shall presently be granted, since really and underneath their external diversities, all men are of one heart and mind" (W 2:226). That is, all people desire the good, even if they mistakenly believe that Reform can bring this about. Prudence, which Emerson defines in the essay's final paragraph as "the art of securing a present well-being," must speak out of this proleptic sense that all people seek the same end. A political philosopher who understands this and knows how to deploy prudence as a stratagem can easily combine this with "truth, frankness, courage, love, humility and all the virtues," so that "begin where we will, we are pretty sure in a short space to be mumbling our ten commandments" (W 2:227).

CHAPTER 5
HOW TO JUDGE OF THE PILOT BY THE NAVIGATION OF THE SHIP

Hieroglyphics: Hermeneutics and Composition

There sits the Sphinx at the road-side, and from age to age, as each prophet comes by, he tries his fortune at reading her riddle.

—Emerson, “Nature” (W 1:39-40)

In his early lectures, Emerson asserted that with the proper understanding, the world would resemble a monument etched with hieroglyphs. To study history would be to decode hieroglyphs “inscribed . . . in gigantic letters—too deep to be obliterated—but so far apart, and without visible connection, that only the most diligent observer—say rather—an uninterrupted succession of patient observers—can read them” (EL 1:29). A true scholar, “Possessed with the conviction that Nature means something,” would seek the cipher for “the hieroglyphics of Nature,” for the “open secret . . . not translatable into words” (EL 1:78).

Many writers of the American Renaissance were interested in codes—from Egyptian hieroglyphics to the telegraph—and many attempted to write in coded ways. John T. Irwin’s *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of Egyptian Hieroglyphs in the American Renaissance* is concerned, as the title notes, with the impact the deciphering of Egyptian hieroglyphs had on these writers, especially Poe. In his short chapter on Emerson, Irwin points to Emerson’s mention of Champollion in the essay “History.” Champollion, who in the 1820s used the Rosetta Stone to decode hieroglyphs, became himself an emblem for a science of reading. He hypothesized that hieroglyphs were

composed of 1) figurative characters, 2) symbolic, tropic, or enigmatic characters, and 3) phonetic characters (6). Champollion's theory and method of translating hieroglyphs challenged the "metaphysical interpreters," whose notions Champollion called, "A refined system of Dæmonism" (Irwin 5). Irwin notes that Sampson Reed, a Swedenborgian and a significant early influence on Emerson and the Transcendentalists, challenged Champollion's scientific readings arguing both for the necessity of metaphysical interpretation and for the value of mystery—for an insider's reading. Champollion's decryptions, which did not take into account traditions of occult lore, Reed felt, could not be, in the deepest sense, true. Though his translations were scientific and literal, his translations remained obscure because Champollion's method could not get at why hieroglyphs were made obscure in the first place—why they were encrypted, why their messages were concealed from profane eyes and accessible only to the initiate.

Irwin argues that Emerson, throughout his career, sided with the metaphysical interpreters—and not just on the issue of hieroglyphs—for he was always seeking what was concealed beneath the surface. For Emerson, Irwin feels, the mystery of the hieroglyphic emblem was symbolic of the nature of the universe. This metaphysical sense also dictated Emerson's form of composition. Irwin writes,

An Emersonian essay is simply the decipherment of a hieroglyph. The strategy is always the same: he presents the emblem in all its outer complexity and then, through the doctrine of correspondences, he penetrates the emblem to reveal its inner simplicity, to show the hidden relationship between outer shape and inner meaning. Indeed, most of his essays begin with a verse epigraph that is an encryption of the theme that the prose essay deciphers. The emblem can be a human concept like history, an emotion like love, a virtue like prudence, a geometric shape like the circle, or a power of spirit like the intellect. It can be a type of man, as in "The Poet," or a series of great individuals, as in *Representative Men*. Yet even when Emerson deals with a great individual, it is always to treat him as a type, to present his life as emblematic. (13-14)

Irwin's analysis encapsulates nearly all of the themes I have been developing, but his "outsider's" reading cannot demonstrate how the play of decrypting, encrypting, and re-encrypting are essential to Emerson's style.

Shawn James Rosenheim's *The Cryptographic Imagination: Secret Writing from Edgar Poe to the Internet* extends Irwin's study into other areas important for scholars of the American Renaissance. Rosenheim's study centers on Poe, yet Poe's ideas about composition and reading relate well to Emerson's, though Poe was more interested in actual encryptions and codes, while Emerson's interest was in symbolic or metaphoric codes. Rosenheim develops three concepts that connect with the issue of esotericism. First, he notes that the practice of "secret writing" creates "secret readers" who feel that a kind of "mesmeric communication" exists between the writer and the reader, or who feel possessed by that writer, who perhaps speaks from the grave (14). Second, Rosenheim points out that the telegraph had a significant impact on the imagination of writers of the American Renaissance, for the telegraph's "writing at a distance" made time and space irrelevant and served as a symbol for a kind of intimate influence (118, 134). Third, he discusses the controversy of Delia Bacon's book of 1856 concerning Francis Bacon's concealed authorship of Shakespeare's plays,¹ its coincidence with the almost institutionalization of the "Baconian mode of hermeneutic suspicion" among writers and readers of the period, and the decrypting of hieroglyphs. Each of these transformed

¹ Emerson corresponded with Delia Bacon and he mentions her in "Quotation and Originality:" "The bold theory of Delia Bacon, that Shakespeare's plays were written by a society of wits,—by Sir Walter Raleigh, Lord Bacon, and others around the Earl of Southampton,—had plainly for her the charm of the superior meaning they would acquire when read under this light; this idea of authorship controlling our appreciation of the works themselves" (W 8:188). Delia Bacon was not related to Francis Bacon.

writers into literary detectives who sought secrets that were, in Poe's phrase, "hiding in plain sight," and who composed texts that contained encrypted secret messages.

Emerson, of course, did not literally employ encryptions or codes as Poe did in his serious writings or in his playful journalistic contests, and there is no mechanical key to unlock Emerson's secrets. However, it is useful, as a propaedeutic, to think of Emerson as possessing something akin to what Rosenheim calls "the cryptographic imagination":

A constellation of literary techniques concerning secrecy in writing. These include private ciphers, acrostics, allusions, hidden signatures, chiasmal framing, etymological reference, and plagiarism; purloined writing and disappearing inks; and the thematic consequences—anonymity, doubling, identification, and the like—that follow from cryptographic texts. (2)

If Emerson was an esotericist, his encryptions are subtler—in theory and in practice—than most of these merely physical or textual techniques. Emerson's ciphers, which he often dares his readers to decode, do, though, have the effect of eluding the general comprehension of those who do not possess their allusive keys scattered throughout his own texts and the texts of those he reads and refers to. However, I doubt Emerson would disagree with how those possessed of the cryptographic imagination define literature:

"By its very nature, 'literature' is built on the occult force of inscribed marks and so written stories (as opposed to oral narratives) are necessarily cryptographic" (6).

"Literature," Emerson writes in the lecture "English Literature: Introductory," is "derived from letters those cunning ciphers, the swarthy daughters of Cadmus, by whose aid man give perpetuity to his fleeting thoughts" (EL 1:218). "In its classical incarnation,"

Rosenheim continues, "cryptography is almost an automatic metaphor for literature (the text as code, cryptanalysis as hermeneutic model) and for its telos (the preservation of human experience through these codes" (6).

While Emerson lauds the value of literature, Emerson's perspective on the value of books has consistently perplexed his readers. Some claim that his censure in "The American Scholar" against book worming, which limits action and independent thinking, solves the riddle. Others point to the paradox of the prophet of self-reliance's extensive borrowings from famed writers. Some argue, as I am doing, that Emerson cannot be understood properly without understanding his reliance on books, while others seem to think him an automaton whose ideas and writings appeared organically. T. S. McMillin's *Our Preposterous Use of Literature: Emerson and the Nature of Reading* is an interesting study of how the cluster of insipid notions that surround "the figure of Emerson" creates "numerous problems for American readers of Emerson's texts" (3). He discusses how "Emerson" has come to be "consumed" as a kind of "moral tonic," or what Kenneth Burke called "a Happiness Pill," and how this consumption or internalization of such concepts as "self-reliance" by business tycoons, advocates of Manifest Destiny, purveyors of the New Thought, self-help charlatans, or door-to-door spiritualists destroys the complexity Emerson's texts (13-15). Emerson's texts, McMillin argues, become therapeutic, an elixir, a "mind cure," or a kind of transubstantiated wafer in the latter nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He writes,

Consumptive reading destroys the complexities of a text through a process of internalizing, conserves the result of the simplification of the text, maintains that such a result is *the* meaning of the text, and employs that meaning to substantiate particular economic and/or metaphysical systems. (24)

When "Emerson" was canonized, his texts become "a body of work that no longer needs to be read" (26). McMillin argues that inside the academy and out, an "Emerson" circulates that has nothing to do with Emerson's texts, the manifold meanings of which are closed down and decontextualized.

Emerson read creatively, as McMillin notes following Cavell, using his reading to inspire his thinking and writing, and he disparaged reading that led to imitative thinking or writing. On this, most agree. However, this solution is no solution, for it does not focus on how Emerson was read by or transformed by the books he read or on how the teachings of others become encrypted in his writings for careful readers to find. Though Emerson, following Montaigne's lead, often diminishes his authority vis-à-vis books, noting famously that he reads only "for the lustres," we would be poor readers if we trust this testimony. Emerson, throughout his corpus, carefully distinguishes skilful and discerning reading from dull or vulgar reading. Whether it is great books or Nature, those "in the know" read well and those "out of the know" do not. He taunts his readers in "Spiritual Laws": "Take the book into your two hands and read your eyes out, you will never find what I find" (W 2:141).

If the heart of a truly deliberative democracy is rhetorical equality among citizens, as Arabella Lyon argues in *Intention: Negotiated, Contested, and Ignored*, Emerson has no interest in democracy. For Emerson, eloquence, in books or in speech, is, as Plato said of rhetoric, the art of ruling the minds of men. Those writers whose teachings and stratagems are encrypted in Emerson's texts wielded eloquence as a weapon in the war to rule minds and men. Emerson sought to be a soldier in their army and move up through the ranks. Those readers who cannot handle the rigors of this martial discipline of reading, Emerson contends, merely observe the march of history, mesmerized, passive, and entertained by shadows and illusions. Great men, however, who have submitted themselves to the order of great books, who understand how to command by obeying, who have learned to read slowly, deliberately, philologically, who have been initiated

into the mysteries of philosophy, learn how to read the past for the purpose of crafting the future.

The Patience of Books

If now some genius shall arise who could unite these scattered rays!

—Emerson, “Lecture on the Times” (W 1:261-62)

I, said the great-hearted Kepler, may well wait a hundred years for a reader, since God Almighty has waited six thousand years for an observer like myself.

—Emerson, “The Scholar” (W 10:257)

In “Books” (a lecture delivered on several occasions during Emerson’s lecture tours in the 1850s and collected in *Society and Solitude* in 1870), Emerson notes that there are plenty of bad and dilettantish books that “do nothing for us,” that “work no redemption in us” (W 7:181). Quoting Plato’s *Gorgias*, Emerson emphasizes that such books effect no *translatio*: Socrates says that a ship’s pilot walking by the sea in modest garb after transporting his passengers from Ægina or from Pontus knows he has done nothing extraordinary—his passengers are the same and no better than before he took them on board. So it is with books, the mere reading of which makes no one better. But there are books, Emerson intimates, that “are of importance in a man’s private experience,” that “take rank in our life,” that are “so stringent, so revolutionary, so authoritative,—books which are the work and proof of faculties so comprehensive, so nearly equal to the world which they paint, that though one shuts them with meaner ones, he feels his exclusion from them to accuse his way of living” (W 7:182).

Though a library affords easy access to the books of wise men, access to their wisdom is more difficult, for these prudent men of learning “were hid and inaccessible, solitary, impatient of interruption, fenced by etiquette; but the thought which they did not uncover to their bosom friend is here written out in transparent words to us, the strangers

of another age" (W 7:182). Emerson knew that great thinkers were bound to come into conflict with the opinions of their time and thus wrote esoterically under the real or potential threat of persecution. However, should we learn to read slowly and carefully enough, the secrets concealed in these books could transform us from strangers into friends. "In a library," Emerson writes,

we are surrounded by many hundreds of dear friends, but they are imprisoned by an enchanter in these paper and leathern boxes; and though they know us, and have been waiting two, ten, or twenty centuries for us,—some of them,—and are eager to give us a sign and unbosom themselves, it is the law of their limbo that they must not speak until spoken to; and as the enchanter has dressed them, like battalions of infantry, in coat and jacket of one cut, by the thousand and ten thousand, your chance of hitting on the right one is to be computed by the arithmetical rule of Permutation and Combination,—not a choice of three caskets, but out of half a million caskets, all alike. (W 7:183-84)

In this "lottery," Emerson says there may be "fifty or a hundred blanks to a prize."

However, occasionally "some charitable soul" appears "whose eyes sweep the whole horizon of learning." He has lost a great deal of time with "false books" and points out "a few true ones which made him happy and wise," naming those "which have been bridges or ships to carry him safely over dark morasses and barren oceans, into the heart of sacred cities, into palaces and temples" (W 7:184).² Lest one "die in the first alcove" attempting to read the millions of books, one needs to ascertain "the few standard writers . . . the few great voices of time." Colleges "provide us with libraries," Emerson complains, but they "furnish no professor of books" (W 7:183). While Emerson no doubt

² Edward T. Channing writes in "Forms of Criticism," "So that a judicious adviser, if asked what books he would put into the hands of a young scholar to be of service to him in clearing his judgment, quickening his abhorrence of all that is indelicate or vicious, and elevating and multiplying his enjoyments, would name among the best those which explain the secret and influence of our literary pleasures, and which lead us to look as philosophers, as Christians and as men of feeling upon those high exercises of the mind which pass under the general name of taste" (179).

found his way into the labyrinths of esoterica by reading Coleridge, Emerson's Harvard, perhaps, did provide one him one professor of books, his old rhetoric professor, Edward T. Channing, who could have served as the "charitable soul" who initiated Emerson into the mysteries.

E. T. Channing, or, On Leading an Army through Places Infested by the Enemy

When Appius Claudius, consul in the first Punic War, was unable to transport his soldiers from the neighborhood of Regium to Messina, because the Carthaginians were guarding the Straits, he caused the rumor to be spread that he could not continue a war which had been undertaken without the endorsement of the people, and turning about he pretended to sail for Italy. Then, when the Carthaginians dispersed, believing he had gone, Appius turned back and landed in Sicily.

—Frontinus, *The Stratagems* (I.iv.11)

In "Literary Tribunals," Channing asks, what authority establishes a literary work as classic or permanent (149)? The eternal success of a work of literature cannot rest on public opinion or common sense, he suggests, because opinion can settle nothing unless the judge is competent. Democratic opinion, alone, therefore, cannot settle principles (150). Prudently assessing the potentially dangerous revolutionary power the public wields, however, Channing warns, "Under no circumstances, then, can it be wise to speak lightly of that undefined power called public opinion" (151). A nation kept for ages in ignorance, accustomed to do or bear wrong for the glory of one or a few, that religiously regards the conditions of this life as beyond remedy and sees the natural doom awaiting the mass of mankind can produce an indignant dream of power. However, below the level of public consciousness, Channing discerns "some other agency was all the time at work, which had nothing of a popular element." While the many are buffeted about by changes in opinion and custom, the few maintain the course:

We must not overlook the machinations or the prudent counsel of a few, who could read men and the times well, take advantage of accidents, seize the moment

when the feeling of resistance could be safely changed to a purpose, and then carry a whole nation into an entirely new condition,—one far beyond what it had ever dreamed of. (152)

As Channing argues in “The Orator and His Times,” wise men use their powers of eloquence and persuasion to maintain social stability and direct society towards the highest ends, not toward the lowest common denominator. They promote their campaigns for excellence patiently—directly to the few, indirectly to the many—until “men could understand the practicableness as well as feel the need of change” (152). Though the many have the strength to change the nature of societies, Channing hints that the many rarely acts on its own desires: “Yet how much were they acting under a control which they did not comprehend or think of disputing?” (153).

Channing situates literature as a possible strategic form of plotting a course for the consciousness of the many according to the directions of the few. He distinguishes between popular and difficult literature (or what we might call exoteric and esoteric literature), yet finds that each can be rich in stratagems. Popular books, supposed by public opinion to be “products of unquestionable genius and sincere passion,” are “marked with a simplicity and obviousness that will make them comprehensible by all.” Their popularity “will be instinctively perceived and felt by the common nature in men,” so the “the best criterion of literary excellence will be the consent of plain, unsophisticated readers.” If there is any “difficulty or mystery” perceived by unsophisticated readers (as Kermode points out about Jesus’ parables and as Coleridge points out about “asthmatic readers”), it is the “fault” of the writer, not the reader (153). Popular opinion perceives it as vanity when scholars and critics profess to discover something that has not struck the mass of readers (154).

Neoconservative and Straussian advocates of teaching the “great books,” such as Thomas L. Pangle in *The Ennobling of Democracy: The Challenge of the Postmodern Age* and the late Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind*, argue that truly “great books” remain “popular” because they appeal both to the popular reader and the serious reader. More than this, however, “great books,” are capable of sorting out the many and the few all by themselves, even if the teacher or professor has no access to the esoteric content. Channing argues similarly that the serious student of literature can read a popular work and “think[] he sees in its unabated and ever growing power over literature, something more than the manifest attraction that won the multitude at the beginning. He believes that what is least obvious in it is just as natural and true as what is most easily perceived, and far more precious” (155-56). Great books, Channing claims, anticipating Strauss and the Straussians, are capable of working on multiple levels to sort out their readers and to divide them into careful and careless readers, or into the many and the few. Or perhaps it is not the books so much as the “dæmon” or genius haunting the corpora, the great minds—representatives of the One Mind—acting at a distance to enlist friends and fellow soldiers to join their ranks. The serious student learns that a book “must be studied patiently and long, if we would possess ourselves of the greater part of its highest merits” (156). Channing writes:

Thus it is that a work such as we have described operates upon a variety of minds. The view taken here will not disturb the placid enjoyment of readers who are satisfied with the charm that plays on the surface or breathes in the air of a long-loved poem; and the differently constituted reader, who likes to analyze his pleasures, may be allowed to think that he daily discovers a profounder import or a more subtle beauty. (156)

Despite popular books, available to all, potentially possessing an esoteric and an exoteric content, Channing says the careful reader will prefer “dark and difficult” or obscure

writings which can "never can look for rank to general estimation." "The presumption is not unreasonable," says Channing, "that a book which is wholly unconsidered by the generality, indeed wholly unknown to them, may yet be among the highest and most influential in the nation's literature" (157).

Channing asks us to imagine, as Emerson does, the author of such a book, written for the few:

Let us suppose a retired, abstracted person, ever pondering remote truths, and fond of studying man in general by profound and severe researches into his own mind. Perhaps he lights suddenly upon principles and, in his happy contemplation of them, he does not dream how hard it may be to bring them within the comprehension of minds that have not his activity and grasp, or that quick sensibility which makes hints luminous and expands them readily into full dimension. Besides then the novelty and strangeness of his views, which may well prevent general sympathy, his method of laying them before us is unfavorable to impression. He utters perhaps the greatest thoughts with a brief familiarity that excited no suspicion in most minds how vast is the content of these few words, or with a bold incompleteness that confounds while it animates the reader. (157-58)

In this passage, which sounds remarkably like Leo Strauss in "Persecution and the Art of Writing," Channing notes how the truths of such a writer verge on incommunicability—except perhaps through a parabolic style full of luminous and incomplete hints meant to send the philosophically-awakened reader off on a quest for wisdom. Such a style will not disturb the slumber of the many. "A writer of this character," Channing says, "little troubles himself to learn whether he shall have an audience" in the present (158). By means of few words, he pilots his reader toward unfathomable seas with treasures buried too deep for the many to discover, or shows them treasures hiding in the light. He does not mind that "his conceptions be doomed to long obscurity." He, like Nietzsche's Zarathustra, waits for those philosophers to come:

Possibly the interpretation may come; and he can wait as patiently for it as the world. But who shall be the interpreters? He has thus far educated none for his purpose. Yet some may be growing up around him,—his unknown disciples,—impatient like himself of drowsy acquiescence in systems and methods of inquiry that did their work ages ago without raising up worthy successors. They turn to the strange light with instinctive alacrity. The seed that slept in crypts or deep in the soil is at last visited by the life-giving power. The utterer of cloudy oracles has at last touched ears that can hear. (158-59)

Those philosophers of the future, disgusted by the times, will decrypt these dangerous truths. Those with ears to hear will know how to reanimate the corpus. This may look exclusive, Channing says, like the few shutting the truth from the common eye, making it the “property of the master’s inner school,” but there those who are naturally conducted by their researches to the “hidden truth”: “that the impulse came from others is no discredit to those who receive it.” “That men should be endowed with unequal powers or possesses unequal opportunities,” Channing writes, “is natural and inevitable” (161).

In “Permanent Literary Fame,” Channing notes that though a man of letters ought to attempt to take root in his own age, if he has fallen on evil days, and no one is ready to receive him, “he must look beyond the present for his judges” (260). Anticipating Nietzsche’s inability to hook any fish and his prophecy of his own posthumous birth, Channing says some proleptic spirits, who write with reference to coming ages, “have triumphed after death” (276-77). To prepare to possess the souls of the princes and philosophers of the future, Channing advises prudence and patience:

Instead of beginning with men now, and preparing them, however slowly, for his perfectly independent views;—instead of trying to make his own age do something towards raising the characters of its successors, and fitting them to judge the past, to judge even itself,—he presumes, without one fact to guide him, to divine what men will be, and what they will require and honor at some hidden, future day. (278-79)

The strategic esotericist “writes for all who can understand and relish him; and, by and by, these may be all the world,” for “he aims directly at creating or developing in his disciples the power to go along with him” (280).³ As David Lewis Schaefer writes of Montaigne as a political philosopher,

Through the influence of his book, he may guide the understanding that others have of the nature of things, including human nature. This guidance may have important effects on people’s conception of the proper way of life and, consequently, on the political arrangement they adopt to secure it. (36)

The esotericist can deploy a rhetoric meant to “regulate our beliefs.” He is not “dependent for his success on a royal appointment; the means of his political activity is his book and the teaching it conveys to other ‘men of understanding,’ who will extend [his] influence still further” (Schaefer 37-38). He forms generals and armies by means of books: “He is forever educating men, either personally or through his followers, by making them better acquainted with their capacities and wants, or by appealing to their awakened consciousness for the reception of truths which they may be said to have been waiting for” (Channing 280-81). Though his deepest intentions may be fated “to be hidden perhaps for ages” in paper and leathern boxes, when his corps of able readers finds his book on some shelf in some library, his limbo will be over, and his secret

³ Strauss writes, “Nietzsche’s creative call to creativity was addressed to individuals who should revolutionize their own lives, not to society or to his nation. But he expected or hoped that his call, at once stern and imploring, questioning and desirous to be questioned, would tempt the best men of the generations after him to become true selves and thus to form a new nobility which would be able to rule the planet. He opposed the possibility of a planetary aristocracy to the alleged necessity of a universal classless and stateless society. Being convinced of the tameness of modern western man, he preached the sacred right of ‘merciless extinction’ of large masses of men ... He used much of his unsurpassable and inexhaustible power of passionate and fascinating speech for making his readers loathe, not only socialism and communism, but conservatism, nationalism and democracy as well” (WPP 54-55).

thoughts, waiting “like an embalmed corpse,” will arise and unbosom themselves to those whose interpretation frees them (282).

Henry David Thoreau, or, Reading Deliberately What Was Written Deliberately

The Arcadians, when besieging a stronghold of the Messenians, fabricated certain weapons to resemble those of the enemy. Then, at the time when they learned that another force was to relieve the first, they dressed themselves in the uniform of those who were expected, and being admitted as comrades in consequence of this confusion, they secured possession of the place and wrought havoc among the foe.

—Frontinus, *The Stratagems* (III.ii.4)

Emerson, as we have seen, presumes that people are naturally divided among the many and the few according to their genius or intellect. Those few able to tap into the universal Genius, he writes in “Books,” follow “the best rule of reading” which is “a method from nature, and not a mechanical one of hours and pages” (W 7:185). As each naturally pursues his “native aim,” each inevitably “read[s] what is proper to him.” “With the pilot of his own genius,” writes Emerson, “let the student read one, or let him read many, he will read advantageously” (W 7:186). Emerson notes that “Nature is our friend in this matter,” for nature clarifies her water and her wine, but no filtration can be perfect—even with books. All the books “that get fairly into the vital air of the world were written by the successful class, by the affirming and advancing class, who utter what tens of thousands feel though they cannot say” (W 7:186). While Emerson’s strategy of reading may appear, like Montaigne’s in “Of Books,” an effect of laziness (“‘T is therefore an economy of time to read old and famed books”), it is perhaps better understood as a proleptic stratagem—of *anchinoia* (the ability to grasp with a single glance the expedient and act accordingly), of *metis*, *pronoia*, or *phronesis/prudentia* (prediction of the future), or of *sophia/sapientia* (divine foresight). He knows

“beforehand” which books “will be superior to the average intellect” if he reads only famed books (W 7:187). He recommends reading no “mean books” and steering clear of the popular press, and asks, provocatively, “But who dare speak of such a thing?” (W 7:188).

Another student of Channing’s, Emerson’s friend and sometimes errand boy Henry David Thoreau, in the chapter of *Walden* called “Reading,” dares to say such a thing. Thoreau is unimpressed by the “modern cheap and fertile press” whose translations and publications do “little to bring us nearer to the heroic writers of antiquity.” In conjunction with his efforts to live deliberately, Thoreau advocates deliberation in reading. For him, becoming a student and observer of truth is to participate in the immortal. His time in the woods gave him the time to read “those books which circulate round the world,” wherein Divinity is revealed to those who know how to read “the esoteric doctrines” (81). To properly understand the oldest and best truths contained in the oldest and best books “requires training,” which Thoreau characterizes as athletic. It requires “the steady intention almost of the whole life” because to properly emulate the heroes of old books one must not only “read well, that is, [] read true books in a true spirit,” but one must also do so in the original languages of the classics (81-82). Unlike Emerson who preferred translations (especially those of the Platonist Thomas Taylor), for Thoreau, one who cannot read the ancient classics in the languages in which they were written has an imperfect knowledge of human history (84). “Heroic books,” Thoreau argues, even if translated well, “will always be in a language dead to degenerate times.”

In order to read properly, Thoreau claims, and to understand the writer's intention, "we must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom and valor and generosity we have" (82). Authors of true genius and eloquence form "a natural and irresistible aristocracy" that "exert[s] an influence on mankind" greater than kings or emperors (84). Their books, writes Thoreau, "must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written" (82). He compares deliberate reading of deliberate writing to looking up at the night sky: "There are the stars, and they who can may read them" (83); however, he writes, most great works remain unread: "They have only been read as the multitude read the stars, at most astrologically, not astronomically." The greatest of books are those Scriptures—sacred and secular—that help us "to scale heaven at last" (85). They are "oracles which are not decayed" and the "choicest of relics" which are at once the most intimate and universal. What was once "the symbol of an ancient man's thought becomes a modern man's speech," for the spirit of the oldest truths can be "breathed from all human lips" (84). However, they can only be rightly embodied by those who have attained the ability to read and become one with the Genius who writes, to know that as the Genius wrote, it was "I in him" and that as we read it is "he in me" (81).

Plutarch, or, The Dæmonic

He is a philosopher with philosophers, a naturalist with naturalists, and sufficiently a mathematician to leave some of his readers, now and then, at a long distance behind him.

—Emerson, "Plutarch" (W 10:282-83)

Genius is the activity that repairs the decays of things.

—Emerson, "Genius" (EL 3:74)

I like people who like Plato.

—Emerson, "Culture" (W 6:137)

For Emerson, great works of genius are “spermatic” (W 7:188). He writes in his journal when his first series of *Essays* was in press (March 1841), “Away with your prismatics, I want a spermatic book. Plato, Plotinus, & Plutarch are such” (J 5:508). Emerson, in “Books,” recommends reading Homer, Herodotus, Æschylus, and Plato (“He contains the future, as he came out of the past.”). In Plato, “The well-informed man finds himself anticipated. . . . Nothing has escaped him. . . . Why should not young men be educated on this book? It would suffice for the tuition of the race.” Plato’s books are “the literature of aristocracy” (W 7:189-90). He also recommends Plutarch, Xenophon, Aristophanes, the Neo-Platonists Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, Synesius, and Iamblichus (in Thomas Taylor’s translations), Livy, Horace, Tacitus, Martial, Gibbon, Dante, Bacon, St. Augustine, Montaigne (in Cotton’s translation), Rousseau, Hume, Franklin, and Goethe, among others.

In the late essay “Plutarch,” written as an introduction to a new edition of the “Several Hands” translation of Plutarch’s *Morals*, Emerson writes that though Plutarch does not have any supreme intellectual gifts nor a profound mind, is not a master in any science nor a lawgiver, is not a metaphysician like Parmenides, Plato, or Aristotle nor a founder of a sect or community like Pythagoras or Zeno, and was not the leader of “the mind of a generation, like Plato or Goethe,” his “genius” is in “the speed of his mental associations, and his sharp, objective eyes” (W 10:281). To Emerson, Plutarch “perpetually suggests Montaigne . . . though Montaigne excelled his master in the point and surprise of his sentences.” It is one of the “felicities of literary history” that these two are tied “across fourteen centuries” in a friendship at a distance, as an example of “universal citizenship and fraternity of the human mind” (W 10:283).

Both Montaigne and Plutarch use “immense quotation and allusion.”⁴ Montaigne writes of his borrowings in “Of Books”:

observe, in what I borrow, if I have known how to choose what is proper to raise or help the invention, which is always my own: For I make others say for me, not before or after me, what either for want of language or want of sense, I cannot myself so well express. I do not number my borrowings, I weigh them.
(2.10.390)

When reading a writer who strategically uses this method, seeding his text with the ideas of others, Emerson writes, “we quickly forget what he quotes and what he invents. We sail on his memory into the ports of every nation” (W 10:285). These arrivals are merely anticipatory, however, for such writers “leave the reader with a relish and a necessity for completing his studies” (W 10:286).

Plutarch knows, says Emerson, as Montaigne knew, the central facts of the intellect (patience, piety, and prudence) and that there is a “superhuman intelligence, pouring into us from its unknown fountain.” Plutarch also understood, with the philosophers, that it is best to be a “man who lives on quiet terms with existing institutions, yet indicates his perception of these high oracles” (W 10:289). “Plutarch,” writes Emerson, “with every virtue under heaven, thought it the top of wisdom to philosophize yet not appear to do it, and to reach in mirth the same ends which the most serious are proposing” (W 10:294-95).

⁴ Joseph Kronick writes in “Emerson and the Question of Reading/Writing,” “Reading presupposes that the thoughts of dead authors can be made living once more through their appropriation by the reader.” The past, “sealed off or encrypted in a book as the past” is dead, and the present too, since it is only quotation, is dead. Only “the magic of quotation” can make the past present, and for Emerson, Kronick writes, “quotations are like the foreign bodies in the crypt of the book,” and the self is “but other selves the writer incorporates by quoting” (370).

To read Plutarch, Emerson asserts, is to find oneself “walking in the noblest of temples,” in Elysian fields among “figures of gods and dæmons and dæmonical men,” among “dæmons with fulgid eyes, and all the rest of the Platonic rhetoric.” The reader of these enchanted texts finds “his sight is quickened” (W 7:193-94). To read Plutarch is to find oneself transported from bad times to a “proud place, peopled with men of positive quality, with heroes and demigods standing around us, who will not let us sleep” (W 7:183). Emerson recommends Plutarch’s *Lives*, but, “such a reader as I am writing to” should turn to the *Moralia*, which is “less known, and seldom reprinted”(W 7:191).⁵ Among the essays there, the reader Emerson is writing to, he says, will want to read “On the Dæmon of Socrates.”

Plutarch’s “*Peritou Sokratous Daimonia*” (in Latin, “*De genio socratis*”) is the story of a political conspiracy of patriots whose stratagems included disguising themselves as revelers and as women in order to get close enough to the Spartan tyrants who oppress Thebes to assassinate them and return Thebes to native rule (379 B.C.E.). In this popular narrative of conspiracy, action, adventure, and murder, the characters discuss darker and more difficult things, including how to read ancient hieroglyphic inscriptions and the nature of Socrates’ dæmon. The discussion about dæmons among the conspirators (Brenk notes they are members of a secret society—the Pythagorean

⁵ In “Plutarch,” Emerson quotes King Henry IV in a letter to his wife on Plutarch’s *Morals*, “It has been like my conscience, and has whispered in my ear many good suggestions and maxims for my conduct and the government of my affairs” (W 10:279). Emerson also describes Plutarch’s book as “a bible for heroes” (W 10:299). The republication of this book, he says, is “a service to our Republic,” and he recommends forcing “Laconic Apothegms” and “Apothegms of Great Commanders” on “ambitious young men”: “If we could keep the secret, and communicate it only to a few chosen aspirants, we might confide that, by this noble infiltration, they would easily carry the victory over all competitors” (W 10:303).

brotherhood [139]) begins conventionally, noting that in Homer dæmons were gods or were like gods. Athena, for example, stood always by Odysseus' side, guiding his political stratagems by her inventions, resources, and chicanery. The conspirators know from Homer that dæmons attend only certain mortals guiding them sometimes directly but usually indirectly, are sometimes seen but are usually unseen, and serve not merely to warn mortals of wrong decisions and help them make right decisions but also to assist the *ethos* of mortals who must persuade others to do things.

From the reference to Homer, they move to the notion of dæmons as found in, among other places, Plato's *Republic*, where it is said that heaven attaches dæmons to souls as guardians and guides (X 620d-3). The conspirators recall that Socrates' dæmon illuminated his path in matters dark and inscrutable. Emerson evokes this myth in the essay "Beauty": "The ancients believed that a genius or demon took possession at birth of each mortal, to guide him" (W 6:273). These "genii" rested on top of the evil man's head but were mixed with the substance of the good man. At birth, this dæmon entered a newborn child, and, Emerson writes, people attempted to discern whose dæmon this formerly was: "they pretended to guess the pilot by the sailing of the ship."⁶

In *The Republic* (496c), Socrates' type of dæmon is said to have belonged only to a small class who have tasted how sweet and blessed philosophy is, who know the madness of the many, who know that politics and politicians are dishonest, and who know that there are no champions of justice that one could fight alongside and be preserved. As Socrates tells his jury in the *Apology*, his dæmon turned him away from

⁶This figure, from Plutarch's essay on Socrates' dæmon concerning Lysis' burial and Lysis' dæmon presiding over Epaminondas, Emerson quotes again (without citation) in "Plutarch" (W 10:287).

doing certain things (such as entering politics or public affairs) but never commanded him to do anything. In this, Socrates is sure his *dæmon* has saved his life, for had he entered public life, he would have been killed long before (31d).⁷ Plutarch's conspirators debate the nature of Socrates' *dæmon*, some saying Socrates merely judged situations according to ordinary signs or omens: sneezes, natural events, things overheard,⁸ however, most are convinced that the choice of philosophy over a public life of wealth and political influence must have been made with the assistance of a higher authority.

In the ancients' thinking about the *dæmonic*, the *dæmon*'s primary function was to assist or guide mortals. The *dæmon* whispers in the mortal's ear as he reads what is before him, whether that is a judgment, a battlefield, the city, or a book. The speakers in Plutarch's essay compare the work of the *dæmon* with writing and reading, and with the divination of the hieroglyphic:

If one that doth not know the power of letters, when he sees a few ill-shapen strikes, should not believe that a man skilled in letters could read in them the famous battles of the ancients, the rise of cities, the acts and calamities of kings, and should assert that some divine power told him the particulars, he would by this ignorance raise a great deal of mirth and laughter in the company; so let us consider whether or no we ourselves, being altogether ignorant of every one's power of divination by which he guesseth at what is to come, are not foolishly concerned when it is asserted that a wise man by that discovers some things obscure and inevident in themselves, and moreover himself declares that it is not a sneeze or voice, but a *Daemon*, that leads him on, to action. (2:391-2)

The relation between illiterate people and writing is like the relation between ordinary and *dæmonic* men (or between Thoreau's stargazers and the astronomers): those without

⁷ Apuleius notes that Socrates' *dæmon* prohibited but never exhorted Socrates and that Socrates referred to hearing "a certain voice, divinely transmitted." Thus, he was either ignorant of its origin or somewhat dubious concerning it, says Apuleius, since it contained something "unusual and arcane" (26-28).

⁸ In "Demonology," Emerson writes that "the tendency of our times" tends to conflate "the ancient doctrine of the guardian genius" with the belief that certain individuals are "lucky," allowing them to abdicate "prudence and foresight" (W 10:20-21).

the ability to hear the daemonic voice are like illiterate people for whom history and politics are occulted mysteries. To dismiss the intimations of one so evidently wise as Socrates concerning his familiarity with the daemonic and his seemingly precognitive abilities is to be simple. Part of wisdom is learning how to hear—or read—the indications of wise men and their dæmons—or one's own dæmon.

Plutarch's conspirators quickly dismiss the notion that Socrates' dæmon was an apparition. Socrates grasped, or was grasped by, his dæmon's guidance by hearing a voice, a mental apprehension like a voice in a dream (2:404). The "declaration of a Dæmon" guides the "capable soul," which requires no blows, by the touch of its thought; and the soul obeys the lightest slackening or tightening of the reins held by the higher intelligence. This is contrasted with our attempts to read others' intentions through their voice, which is like "groping in the dark," whereas "the conceptions of the Dæmons carry a light with them, and shine to those that are able to perceive them" (2:405). "The speeches of the Dæmons" pass through most men, but "sound only to those who are of a quiet temper and sedate mind, and such as we call holy and divine men" (2:406). The dæmon guides virtuous men partly by causing them to experience remorse or shame. The dæmon, here, is akin to the conscience, as it is in the Renaissance for Shakespeare, or what the Stoics called the ruling part (*hegemonikón*).⁹

The dæmon's obedience training is compared to horse training. In men as in horses, it is impossible and undesirable to exert the same care for each:

⁹ Epictetus says Zeus has set a dæmon by each man to guard him. It never sleeps and cannot be beguiled. He holds that each soul is a fragment—*apospasma* (semen, seed)—of God (1:4). For Marcus Aurelius, the *hegemonikón* leads men to philosophy and a life free from violence, pains and pleasures, and hypocrisy (2.3, 2.13, 2.17, 3.7, 5.27, 12.2, and 12.26). Emerson recommends reading these philosophers in "Books."

so amongst men, the superior powers, choosing, as it were, the best out of the whole herd, breed them more carefully and nicely; not directing them, it is true, by reins and bridles, but by reason imparted by certain notices and signs, which the vulgar and common sort do not understand. (2:412)

Dæmonical men, like well-trained horses, take orders from a casual whistle, whisper, or clucking of the tongue. Plutarch also compares the dæmonical relation to military relations. Whereas outsiders perceive and recognize the intentions of kings and generals from fire-signals, the proclamations of heralds, or the blare of trumpets, to confidants and initiates intentions are imputed by kings and generals themselves, “so the Deity converses immediately but with very few, and very seldom, but to most he gives signs, from which the art of divination is gathered” (2:413).

Plutarch’s conspirators hint at other aspects of the dæmonic that no doubt appealed to Emerson. Theanor, who provides the Pythagorean interpretation (Brenk 139), notes that according to Hesiod, dead heroes or men of the golden race become dæmons dwelling on earth after their deaths to guard mortal men and judge their deeds. These other-worldly dæmons do not hold the world in contempt but continue to contend for the goals of the world, like former athletes urging souls to the finish line or like swimmers who have reached the shore who urge on and reach for those still struggling (*Morals* 2:413-14).¹⁰ These dæmons move from body to body throughout history, like

¹⁰ Chrysippus held that dæmons were neither gods nor men but a fourth class of the souls of heroes. Aëtius held that some of these heroic dæmons are good and others bad, depending of the state of their soul at the time of death. Calcidius held a similar view. While noting that Plato did not equate souls and dæmons, Calcidius argued that Plato believed some excellent souls could be elevated to the ethereal regions and be exempt from embodiment. For Calcidius, however, the explanation of the nature of dæmons is beyond the human mind’s abilities. It is a task for the supreme reflection of *epoptica*. An *epopt* is a “seer” or a “beholder,” a person fully initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries (see Boeft 127).

conveyances says Plutarch. They allow mortals to battle, and they intervene from time to time.¹¹

True historical “progress” for Emerson is a dæmonic revealing of truth or conveyance of truth to the minds of philosophical friends though their secret communications in books. This cannot be hurried, but, “in a moment, and unannounced, the truth appears. A certain wandering light appears” (W 2:309). This does not happen to everyone, for Emerson holds with his fellow platonizers that people are of unequal natural talents even if they are equal under the law: “We are all wise. The difference between persons is not in wisdom but in art” (W 2:310). Thus, “the oracle comes” not to all but only to those whose intellectual preparation has been vigorous and who have “previously laid siege to the shrine” (W 2:309).

When the Aristotelians discovered the need to explain how human minds—mere matter—could reason, they did not turn to the Platonic idea of the dæmonic but developed the theory of the agent intellect. In “On the Soul,” Aristotle discusses how “the intellect seems to be born in us as a kind of substance not to be destroyed.” However, it was necessary to consider whether the intellect was separate or inseparable and explain “how thinking ever comes about.” Aristotle contends that thinking is “akin to perceiving,” or being affected by objects. The “passive intellect,” by which the soul thinks, has “no other nature” except “that it is potential.” It is not mixed with the body and is nothing before it thinks. It “becomes all things” by thinking them, or “actual knowledge is identical with its object.” However, there is another kind of intellect, the

¹¹ For the Stoic Diogenes Laetius, heroes are inhabited by the surviving souls of the wise (See Rist). Jamblichus, in a text Emerson read and marked carefully, also held that dæmons, as *hegemonikón*, are the souls of heroes liberated from generation. Their operations often appear more rapid than they are in reality.

“agent intellect,” whose nature is “producing all things, as a kind of disposition, like light, does” (408b 18-19, 429a 10-430a20). This “agent intellect” resembles what Platonists call the *dæmon* or *Genius*.¹²

In “Intellect” from *Essays: First Series*, Emerson makes no direct mention of Aristotle, yet Emerson belongs to a long line of philosophers who reconciled Plato and Aristotle.¹³ He does, however, mention Hermes, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Plato, Plotinus, Olympiodorus, Proclus, and Synesius (W 2:322), who all have something to say about the *dæmonic*. Emerson’s vocabulary, however, seems largely Aristotelian (“impressions on the retentive organ” [W 2:311]), but, like Aristotle, Emerson platonizes. He uses the terms “intellect constructive” and “intellect receptive” for which we can read “agent intellect” and “passive intellect,” though Emerson is somewhat imprecise in his formulations: “Intellect lies behind genius, which is intellect constructive. Intellect is the simple power anterior to all action or construction” (W 2:303). Emerson falls into a certain line of thought about the intellect in his insistence that not only do thoughts come “from without” (“we do not make objects of voluntary thought” [W 2:304]), but that without this we would be mere mortals (“imprisoned in mortal life” [W 2:305]): “Our thinking is a pious reception. . . . We do not determine what we will think. . . . We have little control over our thoughts. We are the prisoners of ideas” (W 2:306).

¹² Commentators on this text of Aristotle’s have wavered on Aristotle’s Platonism. For Alexander of Aphrodisias, “the intellect from without,” or “the acquired intellect,” is incorporeal and immortal. This “third thing” fixes the habitus for thought and leads the mind to think. Proclus’ student Marinus, who declared Aristotle was discussing the *dæmonic* in the guise of discussing the actualization of thought, held that there was another intellect between ours and the divine intellect that “irradiates” human souls and perfects them. John Philoponus, however, refused to believe Aristotle platonized, and held that the intellect was a thing to be perfected by its proper activity.

¹³ He writes in “Circles,” “Aristotle and Plato are reckoned the respective heads of two schools. A wise man will see that Aristotle platonizes” (W 2:287-88).

For Emerson, the “intellect constructive,” or “Genius,” produces thoughts. This agent intellect “from without,” which some have thought of as dæmonic, “is the advent of truth into the world, a form of thought now for the first time bursting into the universe, a child of the old eternal soul, a piece of genuine and immeasurable greatness” (W 2:312). These spermatic truths affect every human thought and fashion every institution, but they need “a vehicle or art” to be conveyed to men (W 2:312). The proper vehicle or art, Emerson concludes is “a good sentence” or “good books,” which last “a long time” yet are “of rare occurrence” (W 2:315). Like Aristotle, Emerson believes that we are born with potential intellect, so “every man is a receiver of this descending holy ghost” and “a candidate for truth” (W 2:318), but there are inequalities between people and “even between two moments of the same man, in respect to this faculty” (W 2:313). However, progress can be made “through a succession of teachers” (W 2:319), these being, for Emerson, the great books of the great philosophers. He mentions Swedenborg, Kant, Coleridge, Hegel, Bacon, Spinoza, Hume, and Schelling, but it is less these “moderns” who teach us the laws of the intellect than “that lofty and sequestered class who have been its prophets and oracles, the high-priesthood of the pure reason, the *Trismegisti*, the expounders of the principles of thought from age to age” (W 2:321-22). These divine *Trismegisti* (Hermes, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Plato, Plotinus, Olympiodorus, Proclus, Synesius), masters of the three realms—the past, the present, and the future—are spermatic: when reading them, Emerson writes, “I am present at the sowing of the seed of the world.” To read them properly is to be possessed and impregnated, or transformed and translated by the spirit of their few words into a new being, a friend, a confidant, an initiate.

The proper development of the intellect or genius, then, for Emerson, comes down to how one reads, what one reads, and how receptive one is to the emanations of the dæmon conveyed through writing. However, most books and most readers fail to reach the status of the dæmonic. "This rag-fair" of popular books does not provide useful "idolatries, mythologies." Without faith in something or someone greater, man is "a poor, naked, shivering creature" (W 7:202, 203). Emerson writes; "If our times are sterile in genius, we must cheer us with books of rich and believing men," writers who can "inspire hope and generous attempts" (W 7:207), instead of books which merely reflect "the prudential and economical tone of society" (W 7:203). The best books are the sacred and prophetic books of each nation. These "ejaculations of the soul" are "the majestic expressions of the universal conscience," and are "to be read on bended knee" (W 7:208). They are not merely "letters printed on a page, but are living characters translatable into every tongue and form of life." The proleptic spirit in them "journeys faster" than the reader and not only "greet him on his arrival" but "was there already long before him" (W 7:209).

Emerson's intention in writing and reading is to look backward, but not because he is "conservative." Emerson seeks a stratagem to design the future through a feat of memory, eloquence, and pedagogy.¹⁴ The ethical and political tasks of Emerson's reading are not those vulgar goals of "progress" or "democracy." Instead, reading is a process of *anamnesis* that seeks to recover not merely the "wisdom" of the ancients but

¹⁴ Or he seeks a *mechane*: a machine or device, a plan, invention, or design, which is, as Aristotle says, contrived in a time of difficulty to produce an effect otherwise contrary to a given situation. One with *techné* (skill, craft, or cunning) can use the intellect instead of physical power to invent such devices to escape difficulties in the present or difficulties that will present themselves in the uncertain future.

also restore their goals for civil society and the state. Janus-faced, Emerson submits to books and to the dæmonic; he reads backwards and projects forward. The best books, he argues between the lines, at once take possession of their readers and guide them as a pilot navigates a ship or a general leads an army. These truths arriving from without can transform readers into dæmonical men if they have undergone the discipline of the art of divination of hieroglyphics, signs, and symbols and know how to obey. Proper reading of proper books dispels illusions—about the highest values, the goals of society, and about the political. History demonstrates, Emerson contends, that though today is the effect of the past, the arrogance that presumes that modern machines and ideas can alleviate the world's troubles need not be heeded. His criticism of culture remains consistent: “progress” in politics or technology runs alongside a decline in morals and values. Proper reading, thus, is an attempt to redirect the march of “progress,” to return to the right way of the ancients, to restore perfect ends, and to repent.

In the lecture “Memory,” part of a series of lectures called “The Natural History of Intellect” delivered at Harvard College in 1871, Emerson contrasts the politics of progress with a politics of memory. He says that memory is the “matrix” that provides stability and cohesion (W 12:63). It is a kind of machine (*mechane*) that “performs the impossible”: it joins the past and the present and allows us to exist in both (W 12:64). Memory, “a guardian angel” set within us to record our life, animate it, and uplift it, also has “a prophetic sense of the values which he guards.” Piling up the connotations, Emerson shifts to memory's material and historical manifestation: it is “a scripture written day by day from the birth of the man.” This sacred story contains hieroglyphic indications that develop and illuminate each other. Progress ought to be a continual

reading and remembering of this spiritual book “until it shall become the whole law of nature and life” (W 12:65). The book of memory has “a good index”; it “collects and re-collects”; it reflects like a mirror, yet it is “iodized so that every image sinks into it.” It is also full of “contrivances for giving a hint” (W 12:66).

Memory is not merely backwards looking, or what the schoolmen called *vespertina cognitio* (evening knowledge) but is related to “the command of the future which we have by the knowledge of causes,” which the schoolmen called *matutina cognitio* (morning knowledge). The past collects as words, a kind of “Sibyl’s writing on leaves which the wind scatters.” The difference in “the intellectual rank of men,” Emerson hierarchizes, is that a few have memories that move with “incredible swiftness” to “re-collect the flying leaves” (W 12:67). This “command of old facts” is a “clear beholding at will of what is best in our experience.” Rare is the one who can call back into being what has vanished.

Emerson believes moderns have bad memories. They cannot remember past yesterday’s newspaper. They are the “docked men” (W 12:70). Emerson says to them, “Alas! you have lost something for everything you have gained, and cannot grow” (W 12:71). Plato, Emerson recalls, “deplore[d] writing as a barbarous invention” that weakened the memory by disuse, but, if writing weakens the memory, the printing press, Emerson scowls, makes things even worse. The newspaper is “a sponge or invention for oblivion,” but the modern press crowds out old or valuable facts with new affections (W 12:71). For Emerson, the greatest men, those who by natural right should rule men, are those who submit to the greater Law and commune with the greatest minds of the past by reading carefully books carefully written. The careful reader reads for Truth and knows

that Truth can be terrifying and destructive of states. The many need to believe in popular symbols and illusions, or in someone of higher status than themselves. A careful reader will not only see what has been concealed from the many but will understand the political necessity for doing so and will assume this task as his aristocratic natural right and duty. Through his eloquence, he conceals dangerous truths from the many while revealing them to his philosophical friends.

Emerson reads dæmonic books of the past because for him, political philosophy is a process of continuous investigation of the few plausible solutions to society's fundamental problems and is not, as it is for radicals and reformers, about agitating for a solution to each problem. As a writer and lecturer, Emerson sought possession by the Dæmon or Genius through reading, and sought to be its conveyance. His intention was to maintain what was oldest and best and, through the influence of his books and lectures, to guide the understanding of others about the nature of things, including human nature and civil society. To many of his readers, Emerson appears as a poetic, spiritual thinker who prizes the individual over society, but to read Emerson carefully, to read what was written in invisible ink between the lines, is to discover another Emerson whose intentions are political, elitist, and ancient.

Perhaps readers will be shocked by the suggestion that Emerson deliberately concealed his intentions from the majority of his readers. His young friend, Charles J. Woodbury, confesses to being so:

I was disturbed by bruit of under-meanings and tones that I had not caught. I learned that I ought to find a series of sub-conscious, logical links, subtly binding these inspirations into an integral whole; and that they were inhabited by a double interior sense, like that attributed to Swedenborg by his disciples. (146)

However, Woodbury notes, the reader of Emerson should not be surprised by Emerson's intentional ruses, for one finds his "hidden sense" as "the cup was found in Benjamin's sack, and by a similar process" (150). Those who never suspect Emerson capable of such conscious deceptions and esotericism will remain unable to read him as he reads and will never understand the intent of his political project. Emerson smuggles into the depths of his texts what he reads between the lines of famed books. He does not find the loss of old beliefs and myths, the leveling effects of democracy and the scientific method, or the continual conquest of nature by machines "progressive." Instead, these demonstrate a nihilism that can only be halted by a restoration of the old moral categories of good and evil, of duties instead of rights, and virtue instead of freedom. For Emerson, the perfect regime awaits us in the future, but we must arrive there on the vehicle of the past.

On Reading Emerson Reading

Goethe's favorite phrase, the open secret, translates Aristotle's answer to Alexander, these books are published and not published.

—Emerson, "Quotation and Originality" (W 8:176)

Reading Emerson reading has become a kind of growth industry. T. S.

McMillin's *Our Preposterous Use of Literature: Emerson and the Nature of Reading* and Pamela Schirmeister's *Less Legible Meanings: Between Poetry and Philosophy in the Work of Emerson* both attempt to construct contemporary theories of reading by examining Emerson reading. These scholars take their direction from the writings of Stanley Cavell, who is usually given nearly all the credit for instigating taking Emerson seriously as a philosopher. I find Cavell's reading and use of Emerson and these scholars' reading of and use of Cavell suspicious, for while each claims to take Emerson "seriously," they seem more interested in pouring Emerson's wine into postmodern

bottles—asking us to think about thinking, waxing ethical on the awful responsibilities and violence of “reading” “texts,” and wondering what Emerson’s texts (not Emerson) have “to teach us.”

Certainly I am also concerned with reading Emerson reading, but I do not assume as McMillin, Schirmeister, and Cavell do that Emerson is interested in teaching “us” anything about “the nature of reading,” or “the self,” or “our” awful responsibilities toward “the Other.” McMillin’s attempt to “free [Emerson’s] writing from its well-meaning handlers” is one I support, but I see little difference between his Emerson-derived “natural philosophy of reading” and other poststructuralist clichés about reading and the nature of texts. In his book, which includes engaging readings of prior “bad” appropriations and consumptions of Emerson’s writings, McMillin concludes by defining philosophy, with Cavell, “as a method of reading or thinking textually, instead of as disciplinary system-building” (125). This is a fine definition if one can make sense of it, but while McMillin’s use of Emerson is “contemporary” or “postmodern,” it ultimately is no less a historicized consumption determined by the established disciplinary boundaries of those he chooses to follow than that of others he has critiqued. McMillin urges “us” to follow “Emerson’s” mode of reading and “unsettle” things and “encourage inventive interpretations,” which will bring “hope” (124). His text of “Emerson” is itself yet another self-help text: “The use of literature is an act by which we can come to see where and who we are, what we have become, and what we have done (to ourselves and our world); but it is also the means by which we might *change* our condition” (123). He continues to describe in this sentimental vein the textual philosophers whose method of philosophizing is “reading or thinking textually.” Philosophers of this Heideggerian path

of *Gelassenheit* “would not subscribe to institutionalized schools of thought that partialize [sic] objects of knowledge, nor would they exempt themselves from connection to the larger circles wherein thinking transpires” (124). (A thinking that “transpires?”) Such expansive thinkers who have found their way to these mystical larger circles will be, unsurprisingly, “open to thinking about thinking” (124). McMillin is, as he says, interested, therefore, in Cavell’s “therapeutic” philosophical endeavor, in his “philosophy as a form of therapy.” “Reading Emerson’s writing in a certain way” can lead “us” to “a new relation to the life of the language, which could in turn lead to a new life and new language” (128-29). Apparently, this vague “new life” and “new language” will teach “us” about our “selves.” Luckily, for the rest of us, this “new language” comes with translators. But will they tell us what they mean? This certain alternative way of reading, this “responsible ‘provisional criticism’” (135), would not be locked into one particular circle but would be “a broader, messier, more textually aware engagement remodeled on an ongoing interpretation of texts out of materials provided by an unending speculation on the method of nature. And this would entail a critical acknowledgement of an unsolvable set of problematic relations between reader and what is being read” (131). Or, in other words, we are abandoned in the eternal *différance* of the exoteric.

While this messy unending textual play and thinking appeals to the postmodern sensibility, which seems to fear closure, neatness, rationality, or decision, one doubts Emerson—if he were a political philosopher—would have any particular interest in it. Such Cavellian philosophizing-as-reading-as-*différance* would probably strike Emerson, whose philosophy was in large part founded upon his reading of Francis Bacon, as a form of *acatalepsia*—a disabling type of skepticism professed in the later academy that held

that the mind could not comprehend the truth and so valorized constant doubt and deliberation. Bacon complains about this in *The Advancement of Learning*, in *de Augmentis*, and in the *Novum Organum*, where he writes:

The school of Plato . . . introduced *Acatalepsia*, at first in jest and irony, and in disdain of the older sophists, Protagoras, Hippias, and the rest, who were of nothing else so much ashamed as of seeming to doubt about anything. But the new Academy made a dogma of it, and held it as a tenet. And though theirs is a fairer seeming way than arbitrary decisions; since they say that they by no means destroy all investigation, like Pyrrho and his Refrainers, but allow of some things to be followed as probable, though of none to be maintained as true; yet still when the human mind has once despaired of finding truth, its interest in all things grows fainter; and the result is that men turn aside to pleasant disputations and discourses and roam as it were from object to object, rather than keep on a course of severe inquisition. (NO I:LXVII)

Cavell, whose philosophical writings roam from fragment of Emerson to fragment of Thoreau, like his epigones, is incapable of seeing that the appearance of indecision or of continual questioning in Emerson's texts is strategic, or is merely an exoteric or ironic shield designed to protect the philosopher. Emerson knew as Bacon knew that such dissembling of knowledge or denials of the certainty of knowledge or comprehension by Plato's Socrates was a form of irony, not a dogma. As Bacon writes in *de Augmentis*, Socrates "enhanced his knowledge by dissembling it: pretending not to know that which it was plain he knew in order that he might be thought to know also that which he knew not" (504). Perhaps these postmodern Heideggarian Cavellian Emersonians are also dissembling, but I doubt it. They seem to be, as Bacon would say, a sect that has chosen "the glory of speaking copiously on either side of the question; whereby they were led astray from the straight road, which they ought to have followed in pursuit of truth, into certain pleasant walks laid out for amusement and recreation" (504).

Bacon's censures seem to apply all too well to Stanley Cavell whose fundamental tenet is that Emerson, who "writes in aversion to society's demand for conformity" (*Conditions* 37), is the repressed founder of American democratic philosophy—repressed because Emerson's texts "exceed" the boundaries of philosophy or somehow are "embarrassing" to philosophy. (While Emerson's texts may "embarrass" modern philosophy, they fit nicely into the ancient tradition of philosophy, which includes such "moderns" as Nietzsche and Strauss.) Cavell's texts that read (fragments of, selections from) Emerson are written in a self-indulgent self-referential derivative Derridean style. Cavell asks plenty of "provocative" and "philosophical" questions, but he rarely keeps a course of severe inquisition. His concern when writing about Emerson is rarely ever Emerson—it is why *he*—Stanley Cavell, American philosopher—is concerned about writing about Emerson's writing, or how Emerson's silence on slavery in "Fate" might also excuse (or, of course, not excuse) Heidegger's silence on his collaboration with the Nazis (see "Emerson's Constitutional Amending: Reading 'Fate,'" in *Philosophical Passages*). In "Finding as Founding" (in *This New Yet Unapproachable America*), his "reading" of Emerson's essay "Experience," Cavell is less interested in reading "Experience" than in reading into Emerson's (refusal of) mourning his dead son the Derridean mourning that founds philosophy as philosophy to come. While Cavell, like so many others, applies an "outside" theory to explain Emerson, Cavell, more than others, manages to smother Emerson beneath a set of concerns that have next to nothing to do with Emerson.

Cavell considers (as I do) that Emerson stands behind Nietzsche and therefore influences (*sub rosa*) Heidegger, yet Cavell attempts to use Emerson—whom *everyone*

knows is a theorist of democracy—to claim that Heidegger and Nietzsche, therefore, are not the enemies of democracy (read: “Fascists”) that some have claimed they are but are really (along with Derrida) philosophers of an indefinable democracy “to come.”

However, unlike writers of tertiary literature, Nietzsche and Heidegger—as political philosophers—understood the difference between the exoteric and the esoteric and the necessity for this distinction as well as Emerson did, as well as Plato did, and as well as Derrida does. Any democracy they would be interested in is only for “we happy few.” Cavell’s readings of “Emersonian democracy” have little to do with what one might think of as economic or social (Marxist, socialist, egalitarian, or even capitalist or republican) democracy. Cavell writes about Emersonian Perfectionism and Emerson’s aversion to “the mediocrity or leveling, say vulgarity of equal existence,” but instead of seeing this for the Stoic elitism it is, he dubs it “part of the training for democracy” (*Conditions* 56).

While many have enlisted Emerson in their campaigns to make democracy better, it seems perverse to argue that Emerson is a theorist of an American democracy to come when what one is really describing is a Platonized democracy premised on slavery, necessary illusions, philosophical rule, and rank-ordering. Is Cavell practicing esotericism himself, or is he simply confused? It is difficult to tell. While Cavell and I use many of the same terms to write about Emerson—he also mentions Emerson’s esotericism (by which he seems to mean “difficulty”) and is primarily concerned with Emerson as a writer—our judgments of Emerson could not differ more.

Pamela Schirmeister, whose departure from Cavell consists in her even more stereotypically “Derridean” reading of Emerson (which Derrida would surely disavow), coaches us thusly: “Emerson, remember, was a great reader” (25). If we fail to recognize

this, she argues, none of Emerson's work will make sense, especially his work as "a cultural therapist" (25), which the post-Cavell "Emerson" undoubtedly is. Schirmeister recognizes in Emerson's theory of reading an ethics and politics; however, the American democratic pragmatism she claims for Emerson misses the basic facts of Emerson's classical political philosophy. Schirmeister begins by situating Emerson within "the traditional philosophical project" which desires "to discover general laws" (1-2). While this approach may be in some sense "traditional," it would be more proper, as I have been arguing, to situate Emerson within the ancient philosophical project which, by accepting the Law as revealed, perhaps by God in Scripture or in Nature or perhaps by patriarchs or princes in the founding of nations and civilizations, seeks not knowledge ("to discover general laws") but wisdom.

For Schirmeister, Emerson's theory of reading is a pedagogy of reading-as-transference which has the "therapeutic intent" of exposing us to an encounter with "the Other" (147). Following Stanley Cavell, she sees Emerson's "perfectionism" as a democratic process in which one attains a new identity by rejecting one's former self and "by reading a sign of one's future self in the text of the Other" (74). She perceives a messianic tone in Emerson, for she believes he intends to lead us into an encounter with "futurity," but because she underestimates (as George W. Bush would say) the character of Emerson's political philosophy, she fails to comprehend his intention. The messianic (or proleptic) structure she finds in Emerson's mode of address, she correctly argues, resembles what Derrida calls "teleiopoiesis" in *Politics of Friendship*, but one wishes she better understood the Schmittian ends toward which Derrida mobilizes this concept. Instead, she writes of "The American Scholar" that Emerson simply

presupposes the coming of the American scholar—Man Thinking—that he envisions, yet who does not exist until Emerson brings him into being through his speech:

It is as if Emerson, as one of them, addresses them to ask when they will arrive, they and we, who are already here. His address, in short, originates in the very future it projects, or rather, creates its own addressees even as it presupposes the coming of those addressees, if they can hear. (31)

Emerson's messianic intention, his proleptic purpose, however, is not about learning to commune "democratically" with "the Other." It is an attempt to create the philosophers of the future who, in the present, can engage in the task Emerson's avid reader Nietzsche set for himself: the devaluation of all values so that new philosophers might arise to create new values—or reinvent ancient values. While I agree with Schirmeister that in order to take Emerson seriously we have to assume he means every word he says (32), I cannot agree with her belief that Emerson's intent is benevolent or "democratic."

Because Cavell and Schirmeister begin from the mistaken assumption that Emerson is sincere, democratic, and optimistic, they catch the hint of his perlocutionary mode of the address, but they miss the esoteric, critical content of Emerson's locutions. I am less interested, as Schirmeister writes, in "what Emerson attempts to do for a reader" (99) than I am in what Emerson attempts to do *to* his readers.

Emersonian Magnetism

Wit is a magnet to find wit, and character to find character.

—Emerson, "Greatness" (W 8:302)

Eric Wilson's *Emerson's Sublime Science* is a credible and sensible study of Emerson's method or style of reading and writing, though he, like many critics, perhaps is too willing to accept Emerson's statement, "I will be a naturalist" without suspicion. Wilson situates Emerson as being possessed by "Romantic dreams of a hermetic unified

theory of science, religion, and art" (10). Emerson's decision to leave the pastorate and the dead formality of religion, then, was based in his insight that the practice of true religion belongs to the scientist who understands that forms are organic and who can thus better form the soul (2). From Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*, Wilson argues, Emerson learned about the difference between Reason and Understanding and about the "facts" of the Organic Principle and invisible power and agency (3). Coleridge taught Emerson that science merged body and spirit "honored the visions of the Reason, but not without proving them with the evidence compiled by the Understanding" (4). Science was, then, poetic, "uncovering relations between vision and logic, subject and object, mind and matter, energy and form" (4). From reading Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* and *The Friend*, Wilson believes Emerson "discovered a way to interweave his most heart-felt concerns. He could unify revelation and nature, life and form, insight and expression. He could be both naturalist and poet, scientist and preacher" (4). Of Emerson's statement "I will be a naturalist," Wilson writes: "This experience in the Jardin instructs readers of Emerson to take his interests in science seriously. His vow to be a naturalist was not idle" (5). However, it is possible to read this statement as serious without assuming Emerson means it, if one reads it as a noble lie.

Wilson argues that in America during Emerson's time, Baconian philosophy, in its empiricist aspect, was, as Edward Everett said in 1823, "synonymous with the true philosophy" (31). Bacon's inductive method, Locke's empiricism, and the Scottish "common sense" philosophers were even enlisted in religious campaigns to find "empirical evidence for the revelations of scripture," to defuse the "dangerous speculation" of the German Higher Criticism of the Bible, and to "avoid the risk of

Humean skepticism" (29). Whereas "the ascension of Bacon led most American scientists to conceive of their duty as clinging fast to induction, practice, and fact," Emerson, Wilson rightly argues, continued to pursue "deduction, theory, and hypothesis" (32).

Emerson's Bacon, like Coleridge's Bacon, was not the Bacon of their contemporary science. Francis Bacon's writings taught Emerson two important lessons: that nature (like philosophy) reveals secrets only to careful observers willing to undergo the necessary suffering and that an exoteric discourse on nature can unveil secrets to careful readers. Emerson understands Bacon's teaching that the old books of magical learning need not be burned, for the new learning can incorporate magic by devouring it—like Moses' serpent devoured the enchanter's serpents (Bacon 78). In his attempts to introduce his new teaching, Emerson drew on Bacon in a similar way that John C. Briggs contends Bacon drew on Solomon, Moses, Paul, and Democritus: "to conceive a new persuasion, a way of understanding nature and mankind in terms of a code to be broken and exploited through self-abnegation and an assiduously analytic inquiry undertaken for the sake of charity" (Briggs vii). Emerson's charity is the Platonist or Masonic concern for humanity, or, as Nietzsche will say, the philosopher is "the man with the most comprehensive responsibility who has the overall development of mankind on his conscience" (BGE 61).

Wilson is wise to recognize the coincidence between Emerson's eclectic interest in the science of Newton,¹⁵ Davy, and Faraday, and his interest in Neoplatonists,

¹⁵ For Newton's importance to the creation of Freemasonry, see Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840*.

hermeticists, alchemists, and spiritualists such as Plotinus, Iamblichus, Proclus, Bruno, Böhme, Cudworth, and Swedenborg and Romantics such as Goethe and Coleridge, but he places perhaps too much emphasis on the science. His emphasis on Emerson's interest in electromagnetism does, however, give him a unique insight into Emerson's eloquence, his "sublime writing style meant to agitate readers as nature excited him, to shock and attract them into a recognition of the relationship between matter and spirit" (11).

Wilson's "electromagnetic Emerson" "wanted his words to be not signs, but polarized intensities; his essays, not expositions, but fields of force;" Wilson's "Electric Emerson" wanted a language, "capable of shocking and attracting readers, of overwhelming them with force, of inspiring sublime vision" (12, 13).¹⁶

Wilson's ambition in discussing this new Emerson is an admirable attempt to continue the work of "de-transcendentalizing" Emerson, taking Emerson away from his bad sons and daughters as well as reevaluating Emerson for those critics who dismiss him as a pantheistic twit. However, like other de-transcendentalizers, Wilson reads Emerson as merely a man of his times who has few concerns other than those generated by his times. Wilson is not mistaken about the influence of science on Emerson's "master terms" (power, sublime, spirit, energy, force, etc. [11, 17]), but by narrowing his focus to the scientific concerns of the Romantics, Wilson does not see the whole—which is what Emerson as philosopher and reader of famed texts sought. Neither does Wilson's historicizing approach err when it finds Coleridge's influence on Emerson's

¹⁶ Stephanie A. Smith, in *Conceived by Liberty*, argues that technology played a vital role as well in Margaret Fuller's imaginary. For Fuller, Smith writes, technology was "a medium for democracy," though her fellow Transcendentalists did not share this faith (72). Smith writes of how Fuller, similar to Emerson's notions of the *dæmonic* and to mesmerism, found in electricity a metaphor to describe her transformation into a "conductor of a mysterious fluid" (75).

understanding of alchemy, hermeticism, and philosophy, nor when it finds Coleridge's thumbprint on Emerson's combination of Kantian transcendentalism and Baconian empiricism. In fact, Wilson's insights into Emerson's method of "poetic induction" (28), Emerson's sense that intuitive vision must be combined with empirical fact, and Emerson's seeming conviction that only a scientific visionary can truly understand the sublime (18) are all remarkable and enviable. Wilson is well versed in Emerson's scientific endeavors, and his book offers one of the best versions of the de-transcendentalized Emerson available. While I find it an invaluable contribution to Emerson studies, however, its limitations prevent us from truly grasping Emerson as a political philosopher.

For example, Wilson argues quite convincingly about the extent to which Emerson was influenced by Davy and Faraday's work on electromagnetism and their discoveries that matter was a field of energy. (He argues a little less convincingly, however, that Emerson's "excursions into the hermetic mysteries of electricity would train him . . . in the arts of redemption" [77]). Wilson goes into detail about these scientific experiments, which he calls "electromagnetic hermeticism," and their influence on Coleridge and then on Emerson. I have neither the talent nor the inclination to rehearse them, and so refer my reader to Wilson's text, whose accuracy on the facts I have no reason to doubt. However, I would like to complicate Wilson's portrayal of Emerson by bringing Plato back in. Wilson feels that Emerson's study of science made him dissatisfied with Platonic idealism. For Wilson, Platonism is the standard "Philosophy 101" version of idealism, an attempt to think the transcendental forms. He seems unaware that this is but part of what Platonism is—and merely one aspect of its

exoteric part. Wilson, certain he has penetrated Emerson's mind, boldly asserts that Platonism was "a philosophical paradigm he wished to avoid. He wanted scientific laws" (93). One ought not decide so quickly on the matter of Emerson's mind.

Emerson read Plato as carefully as he read the scientists of his day, or he read contemporary science as a Platonist. If he was interested in electromagnetic experiments and if these influenced his style, as Wilson convincingly demonstrates, it was perhaps because these experiments and the discourse about them bore a certain relationship to certain passages in certain dialogues by Plato. For example, in Plato's *Ion*, Socrates discusses Homer and the art of poetry with the rhapsode Ion, whose arrogance rivals the Sophist Hippias'. Socrates engages the cosmopolitan Ion, who makes his living traveling to festivals dedicated to the gods and reciting Homer, on the topic of Homer's art. Since Ion is so richly rewarded for his recitals, he assumes he speaks "most finely of all human beings about Homer," better, in fact, than "anyone else who has ever lived" (530d). Socrates flatters Ion, expressing envy for Ion's having learned this most divine poet's thoughts so thoroughly and for knowing so well "what the poet means" (530c). However, when Socrates presses Ion on what he supposedly knows about what Homer knows, Ion falls short. Homer speaks of many arts, and Ion, as Socrates shows, is expert in none, except, perhaps, for a kind of facile and copious eloquence. He cannot even speak of poets other than Homer, who he feels is the best, though as Socrates points out, only one who comprehends the whole of the poetic art can judge of better or worse. Ion proves himself no expert in any art, but what is interesting for an understanding of "the electromagnetic Emerson" is Socrates' discussion of magnetism.

Since Ion's ability to speak well about Homer is not due to his possession of an art, he must be capable of doing so because a divine power possesses him and impels him, "like the power in the stone Euripides called the magnet" (530d). Socrates tells Ion,

For this stone not only draws iron rings to itself but puts a power in the rings as well to do the same thing the stone does—to draw other rings to them, so that sometimes a very long chain of rings is strung hanging one from the other. But in all of them the power depends on this stone. In this way also the Muse makes some men inspired herself, and through these inspired men, others are gripped with enthusiasm and form a chain. (530e)

Socrates continues to toy with Ion, calling him an interpreter of an interpreter (535a), showing that his divination is really just an act performed for money, saying that he understands nothing of his art, and forcing Ion to decide whether Socrates will consider him "an unjust man or a divine one" (542a), all of which are important, but I want to stick to the magnet.

Ion is an arrogant man who assumes that understanding Homer, he understands all that is necessary. Socrates the ironist, of course, claims to know nothing and doubt all. When Socrates asks about the differences between Homer and Hesiod, Ion cannot speak to this, for he is satisfied that the authoritative tradition he understands best is the best and so does not question it, though by his own admission he is ignorant of other traditions. He sees no need for the kind of philosophic questioning Socrates urges. Ion is a fanatic, a true believer. Socrates, however, is not bound by the dogmas of any tradition and is free to question and doubt those myths and illusions that order the lives and thoughts of communities. Whereas Socrates respects Homer, who was magnetized by the Muse, he has little respect for Ion or other rhapsodes, who are at best distant links in a chain but are really closer to Sophists, for as Sophists sell knowledge, Ion sells his *enthusiasm* (possession by a god) and puts it on display for reward. While Socrates lets

Ion get away with thinking himself divine, Socrates indicates that Ion is very ordinary and is not magnetized. Ion tries to find some analogy for his art, and since Homer speaks of piloting ships and of generals, Ion proclaims his mastery of these knowledges. Socrates will have none of this, saying, "You are simply like Proteus, assuming all sorts of shapes, twisting this way and that" (542a).

Like Ion, those who read Emerson reading but who do not bother to understand the tradition in which Emerson reads are merely protean, twisting this way and that. They use what is useful from Emerson to bolster their contemporary theories and ground them in "history," but in the process they forget the rest and fail to see that Emerson's practice of reading is much more complicated and interesting than the theories they propose. Only when one has shuffled off the historicized or the poststructural coil can one read Emerson properly.

CHAPTER 6

ONLY A NAMING OF TOPICS: OF NATURE'S ANONYMITY AND EMERSON'S RHETORIC OF INITIATION

Emerson's Bacon

Nature has her own best mode of doing each thing, and she has somewhere told it plainly, if we will keep our eyes and ears open. If not, she will not be slow in undeceiving us when we prefer our own ways to hers.

—Emerson, "Wealth" (W 6:118)

"Emerson, remember, was a great reader," Pamela Schirmeister rightly proclaims, but Emerson was a great reader not of Stanley Cavell or of Jacques Derrida but of Plato and of Francis Bacon. As Vivian C. Hopkins points out, Emerson was "no average reader of Bacon" (410). From his reading of the *Novum Organum* in 1820 while a student at Harvard and his readings of Bacon's *Essays* with his brother William in 1822 and 1823, Emerson learned, Hopkins asserts, "how to pack a sentence full of meaning" (411). While Emerson may have learned a prose style from Bacon, the superficialities of that style are less important than aspects of a philosophical style of exo-esotericism he discerned in Bacon whose concern was always, as he writes in *Valerius Terminus*, "the delivery of knowledge" and how "to convey the conceit of one man's mind into the mind of another without loss or mistaking, specially in notions new and differing from those that are received" (202-03). Emerson understood with Bacon the differing "forms and methods of tradition" and their different ends, that one method teaches and instructs for "use and practice" while the other "impart[s] or intimate[s] for re-examination and progression" (203). To convey "knowledge gathered and insinuated by Anticipations" or

“gathered by interpretation” requires “the discretion anciently observed, though by the precedent of many vain persons and deceivers disgraced, of publishing part, and reserving part to a private succession, and of publishing in a manner whereby it shall not be to the capacity nor taste of all, but shall as it were single and adopt his reader” (203).¹

Bacon was for Emerson, as he was for Coleridge, the British Plato. Bacon’s intention to relieve man’s estate was not to do so by mere mechanical means but was a philanthropic enterprise meant to teach careful readers how to live in the world and accept things as they are (accept Nature), not to engage in futile and “unnatural” acts to improve upon Nature. If Emerson is interested in recovering “an original relation to the universe,” as he proclaims in *Nature*, then he must find a way through the morass of enlightened *acatalepsia* back to the *original* relation enjoyed by the Greeks. Bacon, who proclaimed that his teachings were adverse to common sense, offered Emerson direction both for the return and for persuading others of the necessity to return.

Emerson’s public appreciation of Bacon, however, was complicated because of the way Bacon was taken up by Unitarian Christian apologists in their arguments about miracles, because the prevailing scientific uses of Bacon’s methods focused too much on “facts,” and because of Bacon’s political reputation. Albert von Frank notes that while Emerson rejected the empiricism of Baconian science, he accepted “Bacon’s belief that

¹ Both Hopkins and Wynkoop begin from the dubious assumption that Emerson’s close study of the ten volumes of Bacon that Emerson owned merely went towards developing his style. Bacon’s texts, for these critics, were just another source for Emerson to mine “lustres.” Wynkoop, however, is one of the few critics who ever lingers over this seemingly commonsensical notion. Instead of reading “lustres” as the kinds of *florilegia* (flowers of reading) one might collect in a commonplace book, Wynkoop finds in Emerson’s “Nominalist and Realist” that for Emerson “lustres” were “a mechanical help to the fancy and imagination” (18 and footnote 18). Thus, “lustres” were a kind of stratagem, a kind of *mechane*.

science was to be *the* road to human empowerment” and hoped that science would redeem spiritual truths and laws, not destroy them (23). Emerson often concedes to idealist or Romantic common sense that Bacon’s science was merely empirical—that it relied too much upon the senses, and, like Locke’s philosophy, gave precedence to Understanding over Reason. This concession, however, never rings true since for Emerson Bacon’s tasks were more literary than scientific.

While admiring Bacon’s scientific and philosophical genius and his deep respect for ancient wisdom, Emerson, like the militantly anti-Enlightenment Joseph de Maistre (himself a Freemason), felt compelled, at least publicly, to disparage Bacon. Maistre (1753-1821) writes, “There is a very simple way to judge men, which is to see by whom they are loved and praised” (*Examination* 305). Emerson sought to integrate what he found true and useful in Bacon without becoming associated with the bad “sons of science.” In his early lecture “Lord Bacon,” Emerson censures the public Bacon who engaged in political intrigues, and though these “deformities in the moral character” greatly disappoint Emerson as moralist, he counts Bacon among the “great men of the first class” who “exhilarate the spirit” (EL 1:320, 324).

Emerson’s careful study of Bacon helped him see that “the father of modern science” was much abused by those who claimed to be his heirs. Instead of considering Bacon among those scientific enlighteners who demythologized the world, Emerson reads him as a doctor capable of restoring his readers from the “fatal blow” that removes “all objects of veneration” from the mind. Emerson understands that Bacon’s intention was never to smash all the idols, only those Idols of the Tribe that distorted one’s perceptions of the laws of the natural world, the Idols of the Cave that blinded one to

other books and other authorities, the Idols of the Marketplace that vulgarize words and prevent the quest for truth, and the Idols of the Theater whose dogmas attempt to quell skepticism before the quest for wisdom can begin. Emerson treats Bacon as an “antidote” to these Idols (EL 1:321). Drawing upon the testimonies of Ben Jonson, Sir Walter Raleigh, and others, Emerson pays Bacon his highest compliment: Bacon possessed genius and a “rare eloquence.”

When Emerson mentions Bacon in his early lecture “Edmund Burke,” it is to introduce a political contrast. Whereas Burke was an unimpeachable noble statesman, Bacon was a “cunning statesman” who on every occasion preferred “the expedient to the right” and used “all means to petty ends” (EL 1:187). In his lecture “Lord Bacon,” from his series of lectures on English Literature, Emerson continues to skewer Bacon’s public life, calling him “a servile courtier, a low intriguer,” and “an ungrateful friend” (EL 1:323). Despite Bacon’s imprudent political behavior, Emerson notes, “no single mind since Plato has enriched his fellowmen with so many of those truths which by their dignity and extent of application we incline to call laws” (EL 1:187). Emerson, however, seems to excuse Bacon for his political crimes, for like all philosophers, Bacon faced the “hard necessity” of living through “the depraved politics of his times,” which made this “prophet” subject to the whims of fools. Emerson does not fail to notice the “incidental expressions” in Bacon’s letters and works that express his (Socratic) regret for entering public life (EL 1:325). Bacon’s thoughts were “noble,” his excursions “bold” and “masculine” (that is virtuous). He was an “Archangel” whose duty was to open “the doors and palaces of knowledge to many generations” (EL 1:325). He was a “Lawgiver

of science,” and “He saw what all saw and also what few see and what none understand” (EL 1:325-26).

Bacon’s “office of the Literary Man” was one Emerson emulated, and he hoped to avoid Bacon’s public errors. Bacon considered it the duty of the literary man, Emerson writes, to “know the whole theory of all that was done in the world whether by nature or by men and this in no general and vague way but with sufficient particularity to make him if need be master of the practice also” (EL 1:327-28). Such a literary man would resemble Socrates’ general in Xenophon, for he would possess the theories and arts belonging to the realms of business, courts, trades, arts, armies, navigation, luxury, “and also of cunning, of dissimulation, of fraud, of poison” (EL 1:328). Emerson admired the iconoclastic Bacon who smashed the Idols of the mind, and the Bacon who, like the Pyrrhonist Montaigne in “That it is folly to measure truth and error by our own capacity,” considered it imprudent to dismiss beliefs and strange occurrences that do not admit of immediate understanding.

For Emerson, Bacon’s books are among “the principle books of the English language,” and, like eternal works such as Homer’s, no single reading of them will reveal all that they contain. Such hieroglyphic writings, Emerson eulogizes, outlast all physical monuments to greatness, and outlive their particular regimes. Their wisdom is not limited to the time of their inscriptions but is “capable of perpetual renovation,” and their authors can only be born, perhaps, posthumously. These deeply carved, dark and difficult “spermatic” books continue to generate and “cast their seed in the minds of others provoking and causing infinite actions and opinions in succeeding ages” (EL 1:330).

Even though Nature sometimes does terrible things, it warrants and rewards careful and humble study, and Emerson feels Lord Bacon deserves equal attention despite his misdeeds and the misdeeds of his “bad sons.” Bacon’s “massive sentences and treatises,” like nature, must be studied with a humble mind if we are to apprehend the scope of his philosophy. Emerson says of the *Advancement of Learning*, “No man has done with this book who has read it but once. The sentences are so dense with meaning that the attention is withdrawn from the general views to particular passages” (EL 1:329). Emerson admires Bacon for many things: for his method of slow induction, which by accumulating observations and experiments could deduce a rule (EL 1:330), and for his attraction to all parts of nature, to the occult as well as the manifest. Bacon’s interest in obscure classes of facts—coincidences, auguries, dreams, omens, sacred lots—which cannot be explained, Emerson says, also deserve to be considered, and a theory of them is greatly to be desired.

The Anonymous Little Azure-Colored Book

The thinker keeps what others throw away. He is aware of God’s way of hiding things, i.e., in light. . . . Set men upon thinking, and you have been to them a god.
—Emerson (J 4:7)

Nature is Emerson’s most famous text—read by casual readers, students, and scholars. However, because this canonical text is almost always already, as McMillin says, pre-consumed, even those who pay closest attention to the “text” often fail to see what is before their eyes. Should we pay more careful attention to what Emerson learned from Bacon as we read *Nature*, we can perhaps begin to answer a most intriguing question—one that is almost never asked: Why did Emerson choose to publish his first book, *Nature* (1836), anonymously? While critics have detailed Emerson’s receiving the

publication proofs for *Nature*, the “refractoriness, apparent inconsistency, and even contradictoriness of Emerson’s notoriously self-reliant sentences” (Hodder 1), Emerson’s complaint of the “crack” in *Nature* not easily soldered, his intention to complete it with an additional essay called “Spirit,” and hundreds of other aspects relating to its contents and style, almost no one has been made curious by this little azure-colored book intentionally bearing no author’s name on its title page. Robert D. Richardson, Jr., passes over this tidbit in his biography. Ralph L. Rusk writes in his, “If its title page bore no name, a name was hardly needed, so characteristic of Emerson were the bold thought, checked now and then by admirable restraint, and the poetic but quite functional style of this extraordinary essay” (240).

Emerson’s contemporary critics were less sure than Rusk, for in the comments collected by Sealts and Ferguson, many critics assumed Bronson Alcott authored the book. The orientation of the book is also unclear: Alcott considered *Nature* an exemplary Swedenborgian text, but others considered this anonymous text heresy against the Swedenborgian New Church. Albert von Frank, in his essay “The Composition of *Nature*: Writing and the Self in the Launching of a Career,” collected in a volume called *Biographies of Books*, where it might be reasonable to assume that a detail such as anonymous publication would be an important factor, also fails to mention Emerson’s deliberate act. Critics have examined Emerson’s reading of natural history, the powerful influence of his travels in Europe, his Pauline “conversionary experience” at the *Jardin des Plantes* (Brown, Wilson); they have noted the influence of Thomas Carlyle, Bronson Alcott, Francis Bacon, S. T. Coleridge, and Plotinus (Hopkins, Harris); they have figured in Emerson’s grief over the death of his brother Charles (Packer, Michael); and they have

discussed Emerson's transition from pulpit to lecturer and essayist (Robinson). This romantic-poetic-pantheist-biographical-naturalist vein has yielded much that counts as treasure, yet almost no one has found *Nature's* anonymity a clue worth following. Should we dig deeper into *Nature* using different tools we might discover things rarer, and though their value is uncertain, their significance could be great.

One who does consider Emerson's anonymous publication of *Nature* noteworthy is Arthur Versluis in *The Hermetic Book of Nature*. A scholar whose work focuses on the religious and hermetic traditions of Western Esotericism, and author of *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* and *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance*, Versluis argues that Emerson's was unquestionably a significant rhetorical gesture that reveals Emerson's deep sense of connection with Hermetic spirituality (1, 7). Emerson's little book, though much influenced by such German Romantics as Novalis, Goethe, Mendelssohn, Herder, Fichte, Lessing, and Schleiermacher (many of whom were well-versed in the Hermetic, Rosicrucian, and alchemical traditions), is based, Versluis argues, in deeply Platonic premises (1, 13). *Nature* was, Versluis asserts, Emerson's attempt to voice an American gnosis, his attempt to urge Americans to realize a spiritual tradition of their own that was still in harmony with the ancient traditions (1-2). The anonymity of this call to a select few capable of understanding it should be understood as characteristic of a Hermetic text, Versluis continues, for the Hermetic tradition is filled with pseudonymous and anonymous texts since the revelation is always more important than its human vehicle (10-11).²

² In "Greatness," Emerson writes, "For the highest wisdom does not concern itself with particular men, but with men enamored with the law and the Eternal Source. Say with Antoninus, 'If the picture is good, who cares who made it? What matters it by whom the

Emerson published anonymously not for practical reasons (such as fear of persecution), Versluis argues, but because of the implications of doing so (8). The *Corpus Hermeticum*, a series of anonymous treatises attributed to Hermes—the messenger between the human and the divine realms—served as a source of esoteric knowledge for the Greco-European world. These texts, dialogues between a sage and an initiate seeking wisdom, became one of the sources of the esoteric tradition's convention and method of revealing secret truths directly only to individuals by means of a convoluted and difficult rhetoric meant to test the seeker's mettle. Emerson's intention, Versluis contends, was to unite Christianity with these esoteric traditions to create a distinctly American form of hermetic spirituality (7). Unlike the closed, initiatory tradition of Hermeticism, however, Versluis believes Emerson's language is direct and open to all (61).

While Versluis' focus is Emerson's religious or spiritual esotericism and not his political and philosophical esotericism, Versluis' study does provide valuable insight into Emerson as a writer and philosopher. Emerson was certainly keenly interested in the mystics, occultists, theosophists, and hermeticists Versluis points out he gained access to in large part through his friendship with Alcott, whose library contained many volumes of esoterica brought from Europe,³ but our understanding of Emerson as a *political* philosopher is limited if we leave him in this provocative *spiritual* company. Emerson certainly made exoteric use of the esoteric symbols, language, and methods of the hermetic tradition, but his ends were less spiritual than political or ethical (there being

good is done, by yourself or another?' If it is the truth, what matters who said it?" (W 8:295).

³ See Versluis' *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance* for details about the libraries of esoterica brought to New England (21-52).

little difference between these terms for a Platonist). Where Versluis and I concur is when he argues that Emerson's intention was to fashion a new science that was really an ancient science: a hermetic contemplation of the whole, a metaphysics of all things (68). This science was to counteract the materialist, empirical, and sensualist science of Locke and the Enlightenment and restore the Platonist political science of metaphysics. It was not to be a science of facts or of understanding, but a way of using reason to contemplate what things mean for human societies and their organization (69).

Emerson's intention in *Nature* was not to advocate or initiate "an original relation with the universe" as some "new" thing. Nor was it to simply do away with the dry bones of the past. Drawing on the models of Proverbs, Montaigne, Coleridge, and Bacon, Emerson's task was never merely to call attention to the wonders of nature, or to simply read nature as scripture, but to reassert into the scientific and mechanistic world created by those who claimed to be Bacon's heirs the idea that the best—because eternal—laws of ethics and politics are to be derived from nature, not the constantly changing perceptions of "progress." Bacon and Descartes had to, in their times, seek ways to subtly introduce their new science into a world whose ideas and customs were formed by old religions (see Lampert's *Nietzsche and Modern Times*). Emerson's task was different. He had to rhetorically redirect the stream of technology and science into an ethical (exoterically religious, spiritual, or mystical) system in order to redeem metaphysics in a world that privileged the physics of the material and to re-introduce the wisdom of the old mysteries into a world formed by the new enlightened science. Prophetic utterances found the best regimes, not scientific laws or the rule of law. Emerson does not believe that scientific or political progress can relieve man's estate, but

perhaps a restoration of the “original” relationship with the universe, of the old ways of metaphysical research and experimentation, and of the old political attitudes could help guide the world toward the best regime.

The Masquerade

How can a man remain concealed? How can a man remain concealed?

—Confucius, recorded by Emerson (J 4:10)

Mythology is no man’s work; but, what we daily observe in regard to the bon-mots that circulate in society,—that every talker helps a story in repeating it, until, at last, from the slenderest filament of fact a good fable is constructed.

—Emerson, “Quotation and Originality” (W 8:173)

When Emerson sent Thomas Carlyle a copy of *Nature*, he wrote in the accompanying letter that his “little book” was but “an entering wedge ... for something more worthy and significant,” that it was but “a naming of topics” (*Selected* 167). For Emerson, this “entering wedge” could function as a method of recruitment for his political project. Just as the sons of science needed an army of workers to conduct their observations and experiments, so Emerson needs to recruit his own corps to undo the damage done by enlightened science and politics, to re-mythologize the world, to reestablish the rank ordering of the intellect destroyed by the Enlightenment’s leveling of wits, and to begin delineating the path towards the best regime. But why did Emerson publish *Nature* anonymously? Why does he enter the stage masked? If *Nature* serves as a kind of entry point, or outline, or preface to Emerson’s corpus, as most readers (including Carlyle) and critics believe, how does this manner of appearance befit the book and his corpus? Is this gesture ironic? For Alan D. Hodder, “Emerson’s rhetoric [in *Nature*] is thoroughly ironic” (141). Hodder carefully notes the contradictoriness of *Nature*’s sentences, claims Emerson’s lapses have “the license of method” (1), and argues

that *Nature* ought “not be taken at face value” (3), for Emerson practices a “rhetoric of illusion” (115). However, Hodder never seems to find that “other thing” indicated by Emerson’s irony.

Emerson’s method is, perhaps, similar to Maimonides’, who identifies, in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, seven modes of inconsistency that a philosopher may use to throw careless readers off his scent. An author might:

- 1) Collect opinions of others but neglect to mention their names,
- 2) Assert an opinion that he subsequently rejects or alters but retain both opinions,
- 3) Intend some passages to be taken literally and others to be taken figuratively but not distinguish them,
- 4) Make statements whose sense seems identical but that are based on different premises, or use the same term to express different subjects without indicating the different uses of that term,
- 5) Introduce a difficult notion simply and perhaps inaccurately at first, only to treat it more fully later,
- 6) Indicate his true sense by means of a contradiction which only becomes apparent following a series of premises, or,
- 7) Introduce a difficult metaphysical subject by partly disclosing it and partly concealing it in such a way as to prevent the uneducated from perceiving the contradiction. (9-11)

A careful study of *Nature* reveals that Emerson uses these esoteric methods, for he quotes and misquotes from various authors, mixes up the opinions he truly holds with those he holds only provisionally and those meant to be read literally or figuratively, uses such key terms as “nature” in a variety of opposing senses, develops his argument circuitously, and counts on a careful reader to negotiate his seeming contradictions.⁴

As a preparatory work, *Nature* does not state directly the controversial conclusions Emerson implies only indirectly. He understands the rules of political

⁴ David Jacobson, however, in *Emerson's Pragmatic Vision: The Dance of the Eye*, argues that *Nature* enacts a principle of disclosure or unconcealment, a “Joyous Science” (11).

philosophy: it is prudent not to advocate innovation or radical change and it is wisest to obey and submit religiously to the laws, customs, and institutions of one's regime. The "religion" that binds his regime is the laws of democracy and Baconian science. Emerson's mode of address demonstrates a Pyrrhonist ability to mobilize the "perhaps," the suspension of judgment, and the stratagem of non-assertion he learned from Montaigne. Emerson will continually approach the edge and be on the verge of announcing the necessity of rank ordering for the proper cultivation of the best things, yet he will back away, saying that the great truths are open to all should they but seek them. (Unfortunately, perhaps, for Emerson and his legacy, this seemingly democratic mode of address is too often taken as metal more attractive, for Emerson "self-help" quote books and studies of Emerson's "liberalism" continue to appear.) Just as when he will famously announce, "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist," *Nature* leaves the implications and the conclusions of Emerson's words in a democratic world to be discovered by his careful readers. Meanwhile, he escapes detection from the less careful readers, for he seems to speak of the unlimited possibilities of the democratic individual.

There are many reasons why an author might choose to send his book out into the world without a father. An author whose book contained radical or subversive ideas might choose to publish anonymously or pseudonymously out of some justified fear of persecution. Some claim Montaigne was the true author of the anti-monarchal tract *On Voluntary Servitude*, but that he published it under his dead friend's name to protect his political reputation (see Schaefer, *Freedom*). Emerson's little book, though, hardly contains anything so subversive as the suggestion of revolution or regicide. Nor does it contain the kinds of flamboyant criticisms of modern society that his friend Thomas

Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* did, which also appeared anonymously. In his introduction to what he calls Carlyle's "little Work," Emerson criticizes Carlyle's "humour"—his character—(also see Harris 40) for choosing "to advance the gravest speculations upon the gravest topics in a quaint and burlesque style." This "masquerade" of Carlyle's, Emerson says, will offend some, but Carlyle knows how devices of this sort can divide audiences or speak to differently composed audiences simultaneously. Those offended by Carlyle's manner of address, Emerson writes, "will not hear what he has to say," but "it may chance to draw others to listen to his wisdom." But Emerson's little book is neither as openly brash as his friend's nor does it possess the kind of "manifest design" of Carlyle's book, "which is, a Criticism upon the Spirit of the Age,—we had almost said, of the hour, in which we live." Despite Carlyle's "gaiety," Emerson writes, his meaning is "earnest," and he "discovers an insight into the manifold wants and tendencies of human nature" (in Carlyle xx).

While not bluntly subversive in its politics or its social criticism, *Nature* did perhaps pose a threat to religion. The editors of the newest *Collected Works*, while passing over the fact that *Nature* appeared with no author's name attached, like many others contend that *Nature* was intended to place Transcendentalism onto the battlefield of the New England religious controversies (1:5), but they do not press this line far. That *Nature* serves as a kind of "coming out" for the former Unitarian minister (even if the coming out party is a masquerade ball) is obvious enough, but Emerson's intention for his little book is not that it boldly spark innovation in religion any more than he hoped it would lead directly to revolution in politics or civil society. When Emerson's literary executor James Elliot Cabot discusses *Nature* in his *Memoir*, he recalls Oliver Wendall

Holmes' eulogy for Emerson. Holmes called Emerson "an iconoclast without a hammer, who took down our idols from their pedestals so tenderly that it seemed like an act of worship." Cabot finds Holmes' characterization appropriate, but reorients it, writing, "but I am not sure that he took them down, or even thought it important that they should come down, so long as they were really objects of worship" (W 13:262).

Emerson was too circumspect to set himself naked in any kingdom. The anonymity of *Nature* could be symbolic: its author is hidden as the author of Nature is hidden, but not so well as to be undiscoverable by those who know how or where to look. *Nature*, with its opening motto from Plotinus,⁵ could seem an emanation from the Universal Soul, and the vessel this wisdom has been poured into and which redistributes it is inconsequential, but if *Nature* is an emanation, it arrives trailing the dæmons of those who have told its tale before. It could seem a revelation, but it would be a revelation in debt, for it is more a compendium of borrowings than a new announcement of spirit into the material world. It is perhaps best to consider *Nature* a parable, fable, or myth whose moral is more important than its author is, for like a fable or myth, it appeared in the world without an author, and like these wise tales is an accretion of retellings.⁶ As fables move through space and time, names change, certain details are dropped, and others are amplified. Emerson's little book is the result of this constant addition of links to the dæmonic chain. This fable, intended to awaken the minds and form the judgment of its audience, arrives anonymously because its "author" knew that it was composed of

⁵ "Nature is but an image or imitation of wisdom, the last thing of the soul; nature being a thing which doth only do, but not know."

⁶ Annabel Patterson notes, however, that fables, which have their origins from a thousand different sources, are only able to acquire cultural resonance if there is a name is clinging to them, such as Aesop's (15).

quotations and allusions to others, to that esoteric lineage of other borrowers and Socratic speakers, to an “uninterrupted succession of patient observers” (EL 1:29).

The mask Emerson wears is literally multifaceted: sometimes it appears to be Coleridge, Carlyle, Plotinus, Charles Emerson, or Bronson Alcott, sometimes as Bacon or Montaigne, and sometimes as a Neoplatonist. Emerson writes as those he learned to write from wrote—he imitates and impersonates. He collects opinions of others but neglects to mention their names; he reorients old truths for a new world. As Montaigne borrows, so Emerson borrows, transplanting and confounding other writers’ words with their own and concealing this practice “to awe the temerity of those precipitate censors who fall upon all sorts of writing” (Montaigne, “Of Books” 2:10:390).

What difference does it make to fellow travelers on a quest of wisdom who said what? Emerson counts on his provocations being ignored by most—for he has no interest in the vulgar many, nor does he think them capable of receiving his instruction, but Emerson knows that his borrowings are well weighed and that they identify him as clearly as any clan or cult markings could. Emerson might say as Montaigne said, “let none lay stress upon the matter I write, but upon my method in writing it.” And he might equally say to those he has made curious, “I shall love any one that can unplume me, that is, by clearness of understanding and judgment, and by the sole distinction of the force and beauty of the discourse” (Montaigne 2:10:390). He has less love, however, for those journalists and reviewers who do him “a great annoyance” by writing about him, for they “take me away from my privacy & thrust me before my time, (if ever there be a time) into the arena of the gladiators, to be stared at” (L 178).

The Transcendentalists

Nobody can say what everybody feels, and what all would jump to hear, if it should be said, and, moreover, which all have a confused belief *might be* said.

—Emerson (J 4:29)

In the late 1830s, Emerson, the newly married widower and former pastor, was making a transition from a solitary existence to one more social. His lecture series were well attended. He was writing, publishing, and making friends with some rather unusual people united around a loose-fitting religious and philosophical tendency known as Transcendentalism.⁷ Francis Bowen's review of *Nature*, called "Transcendentalism," published in the *Christian Examiner* 21 January 1837, however, might have caused Emerson some annoyance, for it caused him to be stared at. Bowen, taking his stand on Lockean empiricism, Baconian scientific materialism, and Unitarian rationalism, finds the writing of the anonymous author of *Nature* beautiful and the philosophy generally sound, but retracts this judgment immediately noting, "the effect is injured by occasional vagueness of expression, and by a vein of mysticism." Thus, the highest praise he can offer is that "it is a *suggestive* book," but what it suggests is besides being "uncertain and obscure," is also elitist (Myerson, *Emerson* 5). While he says he has no quarrel with Idealism, he does protest "the implied assertion of the idealist" author of *Nature* "that the vulgar entertain opinions less philosophically just than his own" (Myerson 7). He expresses a democratic distaste for this book, which he says, "belongs to a class, and may be considered as the latest representative of that class" (Myerson 7).

Bowen is a perceptive critic. He recognizes that this newly emerged school of philosophy is "a revival of the Old Platonic school" and that it regards the "Baconian

⁷ For more on Emerson's associations, see Carlos Baker's *Emerson Among the Eccentrics*.

mode of discovery"—observation, experiment, induction—obsolete, tedious, and imperfect. There is some element of parody in his description of the Transcendentalists' elevation of the powers of intuition as they discover "hidden meanings, glimpses of spiritual and everlasting truth," for he sees little more to Transcendentalism than innovations in vocabulary—their Germanic transformations of adjectives into nouns (the True, the Beautiful), into verbs (individualize, externize), and their other obscure inventions which merely produce "a *mirage* of meaning" (Myerson 8). As a Lockean empiricist, Bowen "cannot believe that there is a large class of truths, which in their very nature are incomprehensible to the greater part of mankind" (Myerson 9). These Transcendentalists, he says, "more than insinuate that the majority of educated and reflecting men" are incapable of comprehending their truths (Myerson 9). He accuses them of being at once dogmatists and innovators.

Certainly some Transcendentalists sought to reform aspects of Unitarian doctrine and social life, but Emerson's innovations were hardly of the revolutionary sort philosophers such as Plato, Pyrrho, and Montaigne swore off. But Bowen, in his own dogmatic rationalist slumber, can only see anything that contradicts his doctrine as a threat: "The Transcendentalists have been unwise, therefore, in adopting an offensive tone in the outset, and promulgating new views of things in an overbearing and dictatorial manner" (Myerson 11). As a "modest inquirer," Bowen feels sneered at and states roundly, "The affectation of distinguishing between *esoteric* and *exoteric* doctrines became obsolete centuries ago, and it is preposterous to attempt to revive it at the present day" (Myerson 11).

Bowen's remarks must have made Emerson feel exposed and unmasked, for they placed him in a gladiatorial arena with a company of true believers. Though Emerson found these Transcendentalists useful acquaintances (Thoreau could gather wood and manage household repairs) and potential disciples, he was never truly one of them. Though ambiguously supportive from time to time of their political and social agenda, Emerson was no innovator, and he could take as his mottos such Skeptic doctrines as those Montaigne had inscribed on the roof beams in his tower's library.⁸ As a Pyrrhonist in Montaigne's lineage, Emerson did not attempt to establish anything or to dogmatize, nor did he present *Nature* as anything more than an "essay"—a tentative attempt, a consideration, a trial, a deliberation. As a *zetetic* (searcher), Emerson knows that to every argument, an equal argument is opposed, and, prudently, he knows it is best to accept piously the traditions, laws, and customs of his regime. Bowen's review makes him guilty by association, makes him out to be what he is not.

Emerson, however, seems to have found his Transcendentalist friends useful not merely for their often entertaining and stimulating company but for the role they made it possible for him to play. Their exuberance and extravagance and their sophomoric interpretations of philosophy and theology allowed Emerson to maintain a fashionable and dissembling "radical" veneer while orchestrating a return to the *nomoi* of the ancients. As he writes in a letter to Transcendentalist artist Samuel Gray Ward in September 1840, "I think perhaps you do not know me & in how remote antiquity I

⁸ Inscriptions on Montaigne's joists (in translation) include: "Everything under heaven (say the wise) follows a similar law and fortune"; "the plague of man is the opinion of knowledge"; "I establish nothing. I do not understand. I halt. I examine"; "For man, the ultimate knowledge is to approve of things as they are"; "Mankind is too eager for fables"; and "There is nothing certain but uncertainty, and nothing more miserable and arrogant than man."

dwelling" (*Selected* 229). Bronson Alcott's writings, his Temple School at the Masonic Temple in Boston, and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody's record of Alcott's methods in *Record of a School*, all presented Transcendentalist teachings to the public. When the press noticed Alcott's gadfly antics, newspaper editorialists and important Bostonians began attacking Alcott for corrupting the youth of Boston and denigrating religion, and they began attacking Transcendentalism as atheism in disguise. Though in most ways no Socrates, Alcott's public antics did allow the Yankee Plato to come to Alcott's defense and to encourage Alcott to continue to force children to think and to loosen up the stranglehold Enlightenment thinking had on religious and philosophical discourse, even if Alcott's teachings were inadequate to Emerson's Platonist goals.

Emerson's lecture "The Transcendentalist," delivered in 1842 at the Masonic Temple in Boston, is often read as if it were a confirmation that Emerson was a Transcendentalist. However, in this lecture Emerson distances himself from the Transcendentalists. In the lecture, Emerson distinguishes between materialism and idealism as the two fundamental modes of philosophizing and characterizes the transcendentalists as professing "idealism as it appears in 1842" (W 1:312). The materialist begins with the external world of experience and appearance: the senses, facts, history, and the animal wants of man. In politics, the materialist looks to mass democracy. The idealist begins with consciousness, is skeptical regarding the senses, and does not seek to order society by vote but by individual will. The idealist measures things according to a metaphysical order of rank (W 1:314) and gives no particular respect to labor, property, or the laws of government. Emerson notes that what is called Transcendentalism derives in part from Kantian idealism.

Emerson, interested only in “the very oldest of thoughts,” does not count himself as a part of this yet imperfect party of “prophets and heralds,” whom he considers little more than children or novices (W 1:319, 329). Their frivolous desire to exit society and their bad citizenship appear foolish to Emerson, who prudently respects the laws and customs of his state and does not, like the Transcendentalists, “sit apart from the rest, censuring their dullness and vices, as if they thought that by sitting very grand in their chairs, the very brokers, attorneys, and congressmen would see the errors of their ways, and flock to them.” Emerson counts himself as part of a different company: “But the good and wise must learn to act, and carry salvation to the combatants and demagogues in the dusty arena below” (W 1:329). The Transcendentalists, who overemphasize aestheticism, Emerson remarks, deserve the lampoons they receive (W 1:335, 337). While some collect “the heavenly spark” and “convey the electricity to others” (W 1:338), Emerson feels closer to those “grave seniors” who “insist on their respect to this institution and that usage; to an obsolete history; to some vocation, or college, or etiquette, or beneficiary, or charity, or morning or evening call,” which Transcendentalists “resist as what does not concern them” (W 1:335-36).

Since Emerson associated with known Transcendentalists and his rhetoric often sounds similar to the Transcendentalists', the Transcendentalists and those critics who followed considered Emerson to be a Transcendentalist. Emerson, however, makes it clear that he is not a part of that tribe. An eloquent speaker or writer often attracts readers through his power to make them feel that he expressed what they have thought or felt but have never been able to say. Hearing their thoughts seemingly expressed by him, they assume he shares their views. Though Emerson shared a geography, an historical

period, and a certain philosophical vocabulary with the Transcendentalists who sent him their poems and essays, who engaged him on the project of beginning the magazine *The Dial*, who attempted to get him to live communally in their utopian getaways, and who claimed him as one of their own, Emerson desired to find that true and perfect friendship the philosophers had taught him to desire. This bunch of stargazers, utopian communalists, and nature lovers were hardly up to Emerson's philosophical standards.

A letter to Amos Bronson Alcott (28 June, 1838), concerning Alcott's *Psyche*, reveals much about Emerson's relationship to the Transcendentalists, his methods in *Nature*, and perhaps some of the reasons for its anonymity. This letter shows Emerson learned a lesson from the publication of *Nature* and from reviews such as Bowen's. He warns Alcott against publishing *Psyche* even though he finds the book's "general design" and its "affirmation of the spiritual nature to an unbelieving age" good. The book is "holy" and inspires faith, but he asks Alcott, "Is it a Gospel—a book of exhortation & popular devotion? Or, is it a book of thought addressed to cultivated men? Which of these two?" (*Selected* 181). In his journals, following an intriguing if ultimately disappointing visit from Alcott ("He made here some majestic utterances, but so inspired me that even I forgot the words often" [J 4:72]), Emerson writes, "The highest science is prophecy" (J 4:73), and as a "Gospel," Alcott has managed "the tone of a prophet" (*Selected* 181), but this prophetic tone fails too often for being "fanciful, playful, ambitious" instead of simple: it "masquerades in the language of Scripture." Thus, Alcott's book fails to speak to an audience seeking either prophecy or "practical holiness." "I looked for this," Emerson writes, "for the writing of a philosopher seeing things under a scientific point of view, & not for a book of popular ethics. But this it is

not." The "prophetic pretension . . . vitiates it for a scientific book," which would demand a transparent eyeball, "an observer quite passionless & detached—a mere eye & pen—sees and records, without praise, without blame, without personal relation—like a god." Such a tone "is wholly out of place in philosophy, where truth, not duty, is the question." Such a tone might be admissible, if, like Kepler or Newton, one were "contributing a large amount of unknown truths . . . But this is not your object" (182).

Emerson's remarks to Alcott could as easily be his self-criticism of *Nature*: "The book neither abounds in new propositions nor writes out applications of old truth in systematic detail to existing abuses," but this, he says, "is my old song" (*Selected* 182). Alcott's book is "all stir & no go"; its aphoristic style extreme. If Alcott wishes his book "to be addressed to men of study," he ought to write with more compression and drop the prophetic pretension (183). This advice is what Emerson is attempting to apply to himself as he continues to lecture and write essays for the collection he is planning. However, should Alcott wish "to make trial of the public pulse . . . print one or two or three chapters successively & anonymously in one of the magazines, & if they drew such attention as you liked, then you would print the book with more confidence" (184).

Emerson's letter to Alcott perhaps gives some hints for his publishing *Nature* anonymously, but through publication, he did make a trial of the public pulse. He knew, even a few months before *Nature* appeared, that "a storm of calumny will always pelt him whose view of God is highest and purest" (J 4:55). However, he was testing a principle: "It is the action of the social principle 'aiming above the mark that it may hit the mark,'" he writes to himself (J 4:53).

To Aphorize

There is at least this satisfaction in crime, according to the Latin proverb;—you can speak to your accomplice on even terms. *Crimen quos inquinat, æquat.*
—Emerson, “Friendship” (W 2:201-02)

In Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection*, which he studied intently during the 1830s,⁹ Emerson found confirmation of (or drew) many of his key terms and concepts. Coleridge discusses reading for “lustres,” he emphasizes action, will, and instinct, and he elaborates on the Christianized Plotinian concept of the one universal soul, the antithesis between Nature and Spirit, and the necessity of “calling the attention of men to the Law in their own hearts” (Aph. XXXVIII). He delineates the principle that “spiritual truths can only spiritually be discerned” (Aph. XLIIIc), the usefulness of the discipline of discerning the proper meaning and history of words, and the reconciliation of the ancient philosophers and moralists with Christian doctrine, which is combined with the condemnation of Hobbes, the Materialists, the “Misinterpreters of Plato,” and the French Revolution. Coleridge focuses on the distinctions between understanding and reason, as critics have pointed out, but Coleridge has other, and more fundamental, intentions: to discuss wisdom, prudence, faith, and the conveyance of teachings by means of the aphorism. Coleridge’s often over-looked methodological issues treating prudence and the distinctions between the many and the few are essential for understanding Emerson’s intention in *Nature*.

Coleridge begins his book by specifying the sort of work his book is, its audience, and its intention. Coleridge announces his book is a didactic work; thus “those who

⁹ See Peter Carfo’s *Transcendent Reason: James Marsh and the Forms of Romantic Thought* for an excellent study of the transmission of Coleridge’s text into American letters and the Transcendentalist circle.

neither wish instruction for themselves, nor assistance in instructing others, have no interest in its contents.” *“Sis Sus, sis Divus: Sum Caltha, et non tibi spiro!”* (Be you pig or god, I am a marigold, and for you I emit [breathe, inspire] not), he adds parenthetically (xi). The book is for those who “wish for aid in disciplining their minds to habits of reflection” concerning “the principles of moral Architecture on the several grounds of prudence, morality, and religion,” and who consider that “the CHRISTIAN FAITH IS THE PERFECTION OF HUMAN INTELLIGENCE.” This audience is likely to be “the studious Young” entering “the duties of manhood and the rights of self-government,” and particularly those headed toward the ministry (xii). His intention is “to direct the Reader’s attention to the value of the Science of Words, their use and abuse and the incalculable advantages attached to the habit of using them appropriately, and with a distinct knowledge of their primary, derivative, and metaphorical senses” (xiii). It is also to discuss the connections between prudence, morality, and religion, and to distinguish reason from understanding by demonstrating that the mysteries of religion exceed the capabilities of understanding and can only be comprehended by reason. He writes, “Mysteries *are* Reason, Reason in its highest form of Self-affirmation” (xv). He aims not merely to teach the art of reflection and self-knowledge but to realize the goals of the pagan moralists while taking account of revelation (xvi-xvii). That is, he attempts to demonstrate how the philosopher-as-philosopher who professes to be Christian, or who lives in a Christian regime, ought to treat revelation and position himself in regards to it.

Coleridge, a reader of Bacon, sixteenth-century Platonists and hermeticists, and Plato,¹⁰ points out the folly of judging truth and error by our own judgment, noting that in the world of opinions and “outside shows,” things often appear paradoxical, but the reflective Christian understands that things may be “paradoxical *because* they are true” (Aph. XII). This language would have no doubt appealed to Emerson who, as Hughes points out, had been infected with “the Neo-Platonic, Transcendentalist habit of paradox” and who in *Nature* uses paradox more as “a figure of thought than a figure of speech” (157). A person of faith, led to reflection by philosophy, therefore, would not be drawn away from revelation, and would not “excavate the ground under the faith of all mankind.” Instead, a thinker with a certain “doctrinal adhesion” would comprehend, as Coleridge notes Maimonides, Moses Mendelssohn, and Lessing did, that the Scriptures, by their “strong and frequent recommendations of knowledge, and a spirit of inquiry,” not only allow philosophizing but demand it (Aph. XVc, CXXII).¹¹

Coleridge instructs that one must always take into account “the *World* that constitutes our outward circumstances” and take into account that this world is at variance with the “Divine Form” and “at enmity with our design” (Aph. XXI). While the rules of prudence, “like the laws of the stone tables,” have most often been prohibitive, Coleridge offers aphorisms as a positive alternative. Aphorisms—according to his etymology of the word—circumscribe and detach objects for reflection. To “aphorize” is to establish the boundaries, the determinate positions, and the horizon (*ap+horizein*) of reason (footnote to Aph. XXVc). Without rescuing equivocal words and expressions,

¹⁰ Edoardo Zuccato’s *Coleridge in Italy* is an excellent study of Coleridge’s interest in hermeticism and alchemy.

¹¹ Leo Strauss discuss this religious duty to philosophize at length in *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*.

“already existing and familiar, from the false or vague meanings imposed on them by carelessness, or by the clipping and debasing misuse of the market,” Coleridge baconizes, issues of faith fall prey to sophistry. He advises that “distinctness in expression advance side by side with distinction of thought,” and he attempts to instruct his reader how he may think and reason “in precise and steadfast terms even when custom, or the deficiency, or the corruption of language will not permit the same strictness in speaking” (Comment XXXIIIc).

Essential to one’s taking account of the corrupt and fallen world is learning how to speak differently to different audiences. He illustrates:

The ordinary language of a Philosopher in conversation or popular writings, compared with the language he uses in strict reasoning, is as his Watch compared with the Chronometer in his Observatory. He sets the former by the Town-clock, or even, perhaps, by the Dutch clock in his kitchen, not because he believes it right, but because his neighbours and his Cook *go* by it. (Aph. CVI)

Where the question concerns the literal or figurative interpretation of scripture, Coleridge advises accommodating to the literal sense when arguing with infidels or those weak in faith, for one ought “to avoid whatever looks like an evasion” (Aph. LI), but when discoursing with a more select audience different methods may be used. However, for Coleridge faith is not a matter of mere lip service. The moral and prudent Christian philosopher accepts and obeys the revealed Law—“those Truths which St. Paul believed *after* his conversion” (Comment CIIIc)—as more than a code of ethics. Christianity, and its mysteries, he teaches, “is not a Theory, or a Speculation, but a *Life*. Not a *Philosophy* of Life, but a Life and a living Process” (Aph. CIV).

In the introduction to *Nature*,¹² Emerson does not, like Coleridge, give notice concerning the type of his book, its audience, or its intention, but he does begin boldly, appearing to condemn “our age” for being “retrospective,” for building “the sepulchers of the fathers,” for writing “biographies, histories, and criticism.” “The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face,” he chastises, but “we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” (W 1:9). What is Emerson promising in this introduction? Emerson takes as the object of inquiry a question related to one Alcott asks in *Psyche*: Alcott “toils to solve the problem, whence is the world?” (J 4:71), but Emerson asks, “To what end is nature?” (W 1:10). Such a question is hardly original, but Emerson as a political philosopher does not need to be original. His call for “a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs” is a rejection of a past that was new but has quickly grown old, of the Enlightenment and of Christendom, for each in its own way functions by means of dogmatic proscriptions and laws and denies perfection,

¹² Emerson’s “Introduction” in his *Collected Works* occupies a similar structural and prefatory position to Montaigne’s prefatory letter to his reader, and as such we might expect that it functions in a similar way. Montaigne assures his reader that the book he holds is “an honest book,” not written with the intention of seeking glory or the world’s favor but simply to provide his relatives and friends a “commodity” to be used to remember him. Since he is “the matter” of his book, there is no reason his readers should spend their leisure on so “frivolous and vain a subject.” If Montaigne is telling the truth, then his book is of no value, but if he dissembles the reader must read his profession of good faith with suspicion. Montaigne says had his intention been to seek the world’s favor, he would have adorned himself “with borrowed beauties,” but instead he paints himself—his defects, imperfections, and his natural form—without study or artifice, but “only so far as public reverence hath permitted me.” “If I had lived among those nations, which (they say) yet dwell under the sweet liberty of nature’s primitive laws, I assure thee I would most willingly have painted myself quite fully and quite naked.” While there is not this same kind of personal voice or obvious dissembling in Emerson’s “Introduction,” it begins by seeming to announce great things and ends by admitting the book will be general and often philosophically inaccurate. If Emerson is dissembling, then we ought to approach his little book with the care appropriate to cultivated scholars.

revelation, and excellence to humanity. This, however, is hardly a rejection of the ancients and those who hearken back to them, for the ancients are the models and witnesses to the fact that “we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable” (W 1:9). The ancient philosophers provide testimony, too often forgotten by the moderns, “that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy” (W 1:10).

“Let us demand our own works and laws and worship,” Emerson writes in the prophetic tone, but he also speaks to “men of study” reminding them that “All science has one aim, namely, to find a theory of nature” (W 1:9-10). His critique is not that we heed slavishly to the teachings of the past, but that we have forgotten them by pursuing what now goes under the name of science: “We have theories of races and of functions, but scarcely yet a remote approach to an idea of creation” (W 1:10). We have taken a wrong turn on the path towards knowledge and wisdom, and we need to turn around and return: “We are now so far from the road of truth, that religious teachers dispute and hate each other, and speculative men are esteemed unsound and frivolous” (W 1:10). If what we seek is a philosophy of insight and an original relation to the universe, we must study diligently its two parts: Nature and Spirit. Of the study of the spirit, Emerson writes, “Every man’s condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put” (W 1:10). Emerson will study nature, which is everything that is not of the soul, the “NOT ME,” and he will use the word “in its common and in its philosophical import”—that is exoterically and esoterically. In an aside to those “men of study” he addresses, he notes that his inquiry is merely a general one, so “the inaccuracy is not material; no confusion of thought will occur” (W 1:11). Emerson writes that “Nature,” according to common

sense, “refers to essences unchanged by man,” and “Art” refers to “the mixture of his will” with Nature. This “Art,” however is “insignificant” when considering “an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind” (W 1:11).

Hid and Inaccessible, Solitary, Impatient of Interruption, Fenced by Etiquette

Is it possible that, in the Solitude I seek, I shall have the resolution, the force, to work as I ought to work, as I project in highest, most far-sighted hours? Well, and what do you project? Nothing less than to look at every object in its relation to myself.

—Emerson (J 3:269)

There are two ways of living in the world, [Charles Emerson] said, viz., either to postpone your own ascetic entirely, and live among people as among aliens; or, to lead a life of endless warfare by forcing your Ideal into act. In either of these ways the wise man may be blameless.

—Emerson (J 4:42)

If, as Montaigne writes in his prefatory letter to his reader, the matter of his book is hardly worth looking into, then neither is Emerson’s, for his art is insignificant in relation to nature’s. Montaigne bids his careless readers farewell at the very beginning, telling them their time might better be spent on other commerces, and Emerson almost does the same, indicating that his reader would do better to go outside and commune with nature and figure things out for himself, but, like Montaigne, he hints to his careful reader that his matter is not the same as is considered by common sense, nor is his art but “a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing” that “do[es] not vary the result” (W 1:11).

Emerson seems to continue in Montaigne’s ironic vein in the first sentence of *Nature’s* first chapter, “Nature”: “To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me” (W 1:13). This is remarkably similar to a sentence from Montaigne’s “Of Solitude”: “It is not enough to get remote from the public; ‘tis not enough to shift the soil

only; a man must flee from the popular conditions that have taken possession of his soul, he must sequester and come again to himself" (1:39:245). Montaigne's essay, which borrows liberally from Seneca's letter on travel, is a meditation on public life, fame, and virtue. Montaigne's essay and Seneca's letter both concern a Stoic topic near to Emerson's heart: self-reliance. Since the means to worldly success are generally corrupt, Montaigne argues, the ends are also corrupt. In a statement similar to the one Emerson quotes from his brother Charles that acts as one of this section's mottos, Montaigne writes, "A man must either imitate the vicious or hate them: both are dangerous things, either to resemble them because they are many or to hate many because they are unressembling to ourselves" (1:39:243). Though a wise man can live anywhere content, can endure the crowd and the crowd's opinions, and never express thoughts whose expression is forbidden, it would be better to escape this "contagion" by being alone, Montaigne writes, but even those who attempt to retire too often take this contagion of ambition and general opinions with them, hoping their writings will bring them worldly reputation and glory, even immortal life. To achieve true solitude, one must also abandon books—even one's own, but every reader of Montaigne knows Montaigne could never abandon books, and besides he is writing a book in which he is the matter and which bears his name on the title page and his likeness on the frontispiece.

If one is to retire from his chamber and society—and if one then begins to write—Montaigne advises, borrowing Seneca's advice, that one "remember him, who being asked why he took so much pains in an art that could come to the knowledge of but few persons? 'A few are enough for me,' replied he; 'I have enough with one, I have enough with never an one'" (1:39:255; from Seneca, Ep. 7). Solitude for Montaigne is a

philosophical condition that allows one to live in the world and observe it but be untouched by it. To live in the world anonymously and remain undetected, Montaigne says, "you are to do like the beasts of chase, who efface the track at the entrance into their den" (1:39:255). One thing Emerson seems to have learned well from Montaigne is the necessity of "a circumlocutory means of argumentation," for an "oblique approach provides, simultaneously, a means of discovery and a method of communication" (McGowan 59). Or, as Emerson writes in "Quotation and Originality," "When a man thinks happily, he finds no foot-track in the field he traverses" (W 8:192).

Though as Hodder points out, Emerson never openly espoused his practice of either a multileveled method of interpretation or of writing, Emerson owes much not only to Montaigne's method of composition but also to the spirit and tradition of allegorical and mystical interpretation as it was passed along from the ancients to certain traditions of the Church and to the esoteric wisdom cults of the Renaissance (144). Hodder also notes that Emerson's mobilization of the non-sequitar advances Emerson's intention to provoke, galvanize, and procreate (3, 106). This method provides "the illusion of forward momentum while all along it is really coursing back on itself" (112). Emerson's "mélange of rhetorical styles, tones, and voices," Hodder writes, makes one "wonder whether Emerson is not practicing here a kind of rhetorical ventriloquism" (115). Hughes notes that this work of genius, this strange, didactic combination of treatise and meditation, seems proclaimed "by some tutelary emissary" (132), and Packer also notices *Nature's* eclecticism and its "confusion of tongues" (25-26). While each of these critic's perceptions are true, as Sampson Reed argued about Champollion's decryptions of

hieroglyphs, each fails to make sense of *why* Emerson chose to write in this way or to account for his publishing *Nature* anonymously.

The entrance of Emerson's den is difficult to discover not merely because he effaces the tracks of his influences, but critics further muddy up the paths leading to it. In his solitude, Emerson lives apart from the Transcendentalists, the Romantics, and the materialist sons of science who claim to be heirs to the father of modern science. Emerson's "subtle approach" insinuates that the materialist reading of Bacon needs to take account of Bacon's Platonism and that the transcendentalists' discourse has veered too far into idealism and ought to take account of the real world of politics. However, Emerson, perhaps, took too much caution in his stratagems of self-protection, since his intentions (as I read them) have been as misused and as badly misunderstood as those of Bacon's (as Emerson understood them). Except for Nietzsche, Emerson has generally been read alongside his lessers, not his equals or his betters.

In his journals from 1834 to 1836, Emerson constantly tests his ideas, figuring and reconfiguring how he will speak and when. As Packer notes, Emerson was fond of the insights of Madame de Staël and Swedenborg that the axioms of physics correspond to moral maxims (38). He reads the facts of natural science not as data but as ethical maxims: "water confined in pipes will always rise as high as its source," "durable trees make roots first," "Action and reaction are equal," and so on (J 3:247). He learns more than merely the laws of compensation and justice. He also learns about modes of rhetoric for their conveyance: "The lower tone you take, the more flexible your voice is"; "the abstemious have the credit of forming sound opinions the first time, and the prompt

speakers, if of active and advancing minds, are always uttering absurdities" (J 3:247, 249).

These maxims take their place among other literary and philosophical maxims. He records a esoteric maxim from Goethe—"he who seeks a hidden treasure must not speak" (J 3:273), yet Emerson is anxious about his exoteric project—"Therefore, boldly press the cause as its own evidence; say that you love Nature, and would know her mysteries, and that you believe in your power of patient contemplation and docile experiment to learn them" (J 3:297). Facing the occasional "mood of pyrrhonism" (J 3:325) and realizing how much "mischief is in this art of writing" (J 3:332), Emerson wonders: "Shall I say that the use of Natural Science seems merely ancillary to Moral? I would learn the law of the diffraction of a ray because, when I understand it, it will illustrate, perhaps suggest a new truth in ethics" (J 3:343).

Wanting to compose "a Portraiture of Man which should be at once history and prophecy" (J 3:362), Emerson understands that if he is misunderstood in his life, he can still be born posthumously:

The philosophy of *Waiting* needs sometimes to be unfolded. Thus he who is qualified to act upon the Public, if he does not act on many, may yet act intensely on a few; if he does not act much upon any, but, from insulated conditions and unfit companions, seem quite withdrawn into himself, still, if he know and feel his obligations, he may be (unknown and unconsciously) hiving knowledge and concentrating powers to act well hereafter, and a very remote hereafter. (J 3:403)

Emerson calculates that he may not be the timely man and that his proper readers may not yet exist. However, in order to make possible a posthumous birth, one has first to have written, and if what one writes is in parables, one increases the chances of finding one's proper audience at the proper time: "Fable avoids the difficulty, is at once exoteric and esoteric, and is clapped by both sides. Plato and Jesus used it. And History is such a

fable. Plato had a secret doctrine,—had he? What secret can he conceal from the eyes of Montaigne, of Bacon, of Kant?" (J 3:468).

Fables, Proverbs, and Parabolical Poesy

I doubt not but it will easily appear to men of judgment that in this and other particulars, wheresoever my conception and notion may differ from the ancient, yet I am studious to keep the ancient terms.

—Bacon, *On the Advancement of Learning* (93)

Many of the historical proverbs have a doubtful paternity.

—Emerson, "Quotation and Originality" (W 8:176)

Hughes states that Emerson read nature as a fable "not to be investigated but rather interpreted, experienced, and responded to" (164). He may have learned to do so from Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*, or its later Latin translation, *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, where he would have no doubt been drawn to notice Bacon's discussions of fables, parables, aphorisms, and poesies. While Bacon notes, as Emerson will do in "The American Scholar," that excessive love of books can turn men away from action, from "honour and the exercise of arms," making them *Pedantes* (46-47), and while he notes many other problems concerning books, he notes that most critiques of learning are vulgar. Kingdoms and heroic deeds disappear, but

the monuments of wit and learning are more durable than the monuments of power or of the hands. For have the verses of Homer continued twenty-five hundred years or more, without the loss of a syllable or letter; during which time infinite palaces, temples, castles, cities, have been decayed and demolished? It is not possible to have the true pictures or statues of Cyrus, Alexander, Cæsar, no nor of the kings or great personages of much later years; for the originals cannot last, and the copies cannot but leese of the life and truth. But the images of men's wits and knowledges remain in books, exempted from the wrong of time and capable of perpetual renovation. Neither are they fitly called images, because they generate still, and cast their seeds in the minds of others, provoking and causing infinite actions and opinions in succeeding actions. (73-74)

Books, for Bacon, are like ships that carry more than riches and commodities from place to place, for they “pass through the vast seas of time, and make ages so distant to participate of the wisdom, illuminations, and inventions, the one of the other” (74).

Bacon discusses how in poesy words are “for the most part restrained, but in all other points extremely free and licensed,” so that the imagination, not tied to the laws of matter, may at pleasure join that which nature have severed, and sever that which nature hath joined; and so “make unlawful matches and divorces of things” (AL 87; AS 439). Emerson would have noticed that in distinction to true history, the “Feigned History” of narrative poesy bestows “upon human nature those things which history denies to it”; thus it is able “to satisfy the mind with the shadows of things when the substance cannot be obtained” (AL 87-88; AS 440). Poesy can thus construct histories of “a more ample greatness, a more perfect order,” and can “feign acts more heroical” (AL 88; AS 440). Poesy, participating with the divine, can display the ways of justice better than true history can by correcting history. Whereas true history wearies the mind, buckles reason, and bows the mind to the nature of things, by appealing to the imagination, poesy can refresh the mind (AL 88; AS 440). Dramatic Poesy, Bacon notes, was the ancients’ preferred method and “means of educating men’s minds to virtue” (AS 440).

By means of modes of insinuation (or “the trope of Rhetoric, of deceiving expectation,” which Bacon compares to the trope of music when one glides gently from the close of a cadence when one seems to be on the point of it [AL 91; AS 455]), each type of poesy can charm men’s minds or play upon them. However, Poesy Parabolical is of a higher character. It is “something sacred and venerable; especially as religion itself commonly uses its aid as a means of communication between divinity and humanity”

(AL 88; AS 441). Parabolical poesy is “of double use and serves contrary purposes”: it can enfold or illustrate. As a method of teaching, parabolical illustration was much used in ancient times,

for the inventions and conclusions of human reason (even those that are now common and trite) being then new and strange, the minds of men were hardly subtle enough to conceive them, unless they were brought nearer to the sense by this kind of resemblances and examples. (AS 441)

Thus, ancient teachings often came in the forms of fables, parables, enigmas, and similitudes, such as the numbers of Pythagoras, the enigmas of the Sphinx, and the fables of Aesop. Bacon also notes that apophthegms were used to instruct by similitude and that Menenius Agrippa quelled a sedition by means of a fable. By insinuation, Bacon connects what nature has torn apart, for he indirectly argues that this necessary practice of the ancients of expressing points of reason which either escaped the vulgar or prepared them step by step for rational argument is still necessary and acceptable for moderns who might need to either prepare their audiences for or turn away them away from dangerous truths by means of indirection or with parables. This practice of Parabolical Poesy, therefore, was used and could still be used by political philosophers, as Plato and Aristotle used it, to exclude those who might misuse those truths or those who might persecute the bearers of these truths. When the matter is “the secrets and mysteries of religion, policy, or philosophy,” fables and parables are often necessary since the dignity of these things “requires that they should be seen as it were through a veil” (AL 88; AS 441).

Bacon uses fables for many ends. In *De Augmentis*, he illuminates the fable of Pan to reveal the story of natural philosophy, the fable of Perseus to reveal truths of politics, and the fable of Dionysius to exemplify truths of moral philosophy. In *De*

Sapientia Veterum, Bacon uses the fable of Cassandra to point to the necessity of rhetorical prudence. Cassandra, by seductive and subtle means, contrived to win the gift of divination from Apollo. When he granted her wish, she rebuffed him, and he repaid her deception by making it so that her prophecies would not be believed. For Bacon, this fable illustrates a lesson about how “to observe time and measure in affairs, flats and sharps (so to speak) in discourse, the differences between the learned and the vulgar ear, and the times when to speak and when to be silent” (825). Bacon implies that those who would reveal all their truths and methods at the wrong time or before the wrong audience might not only find their truths ignored but that these truths might “hasten the destruction of those upon whom they press their advice.” Though the advice and teachings might be true, their foresight might not be appreciated or understood until after the damage is done. Bacon draws from Cicero to make the allegorical point that it is unwise and imprudent to talk as if one were in the republic of Plato when one is in fact “in the dregs of Romulus” (825).

Much of what Emerson draws from Bacon in *Nature* would be obvious to his contemporaries. In the chapter “Nature,” Emerson seems to refer to Bacon’s ideas concerning the Idols of the Mind and the importance of commanding nature by obeying her when he notes that if instead of coming to natural objects with preconceptions we approach them with a mind “open to their influence,” natural objects can always awaken reverence in us (W 1:13). Like Bacon, Emerson endeavors (as he writes in his journal) “to announce the laws of the First Philosophy. It is the mark of these that their enunciation awakens the feeling of the moral sublime, and great men are they who believe in them” (J 3:489). The wise man Emerson writes of, who does not extort

nature's secrets or lose his curiosity about nature's occult relations, resembles the man Bacon aims to form.

Even the notorious "transparent eye-ball" section, that "gawky but oracular text" (Hodder 93), which many a critic has told us is full of mystical import, seems an allusion to Bacon. This moment when "all mean egotism vanishes," when "I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God," certainly echoes in many ways the Neoplatonist ideas of Plotinus concerning emanation, as well as Sampson Reed's Swedenborgism in "Oration on Genius," but this revelatory moment also seems set up by certain remarks in Emerson's lecture "Lord Bacon." Emerson notes there that Bacon's "keen eye pierces all nature and society and art for facts" (EL 1:327). Bacon's true genius was "the distinctiveness of his vision." Quoting Bacon's quote from Heraclitus (NO 42), "Men rather explore their own little worlds, than the great world which God made," Emerson writes of Bacon, "His expansive Eye opened to receive the whole system, the whole inheritance of Man" (EL 1:326). This transparent eyeball might have less to do with mystical ecstasy than with Bacon's seed taking root in Emerson's mind and Emerson becoming the transparent medium that will refract and reflect the whole as Bacon did. This transparent eyeball sees as Bacon "saw what all saw and also what few see and what none understand." Emerson is primarily interested in the "poetic" power or faculty of seeing that can "integrate all the parts": "To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing" (W 1:14).¹³

¹³ This mystical transparent eyeball that takes in all of nature might have another source in the journals: "What's a book? Everything or nothing. The eye that sees it is all" (J

The chapter "Commodity" seems too to rely on Bacon, for when one "considers the final cause of the world," the uses of all of its parts seems designed to relieve man's estate. Emerson's elevation, in chapter called "Beauty," of the intellectual or scientific contemplation of nature over artistic and even religious observation seems a result of Emerson's reading of Bacon, among other scientists and electrochemists of his day. But it is in the chapter called "Language," the chapter most scrutinized by literary critics, that a better understanding of what Emerson owes Bacon would be most beneficial.

In "Language," Emerson constructs a kind of syllogism in order to demonstrate the conclusion he already assumes: "Nature is the vehicle of thought." Reworked, Emerson's argument is: Words are symbols of natural facts; Natural facts are symbols of spiritual facts; therefore, words are symbols of spiritual facts. The logic not only of the conclusion but also of each premise is dubious—or "poetic," but the fable Emerson is narrating does not rely on strict logic. Wilson writes that *Nature* "puts nature on trial, tries it, both in the sense of interrogating nature to discover its end and in the sense of trying *to be* nature," and, he writes, "if nature is a riddle, then Emerson's essay trying *to be* nature will likewise take on the character of an enigma, a hieroglyph" (5, 8). Such hieroglyphs, Wilson points out, "dissolve our solutions as we solve them" (6).

Progress or Return?

Now if one comes who can illuminate this dark house with thoughts, show them their native riches, what gifts they have, how indispensable each is, what magical powers over nature and men; what access to poetry, religion, and the powers which constitute character,—he wakes in them the feeling of worth, his suggestions require new ways of living, new books, new men, new arts and sciences.

—Emerson, "Considerations by the Way" (W 6:257)

3:551). It might also have a source in Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*: "This *seeing* light, this *enlightening* eye, is Reflection" (5).

For Emerson, the parabolical pursuit of natural history is not about “progress”—scientific or political. It is about a return, or is a process of anamnesis, or of recovering and restoring the original, hence lawful, distinctions of nature.¹⁴ Asserting that words are derived from natural or material things (“*Right* means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*,” and so on), Emerson finds natural history useful only if it can teach us the “natural” meanings of or correspondences between things, for the natural meaning is no different from the metaphysical or the ethical meaning. If this is understood, the philosophical problems of religion, politics, and morals could be solved. It was the tropes of nature that converted Emerson into a naturalist (5), Wilson argues, and Emerson intends his tropes to convert his readers and abolish the distinction between words and things (13).

Not only are words signs of natural facts, but words “convey a spiritual import.” Part of recovering a natural sense of justice, politics, and of the good includes, Emerson baconizes, understanding the language of fables: “An enraged man is a lion, a cunning man is a fox, a firm man is a rock, a learned man is a torch,” and so on (W 1:32). Bacon, in his discussion of Poesy Parabolical, writes of Machiavelli’s ingenious yet corrupt use of such fabling, noting that princes ought to be educated and disciplined “how to play the

¹⁴ Emerson anticipates what Leo Strauss will elucidate in “Progress or Return?” In this lecture, Strauss speaks apocalyptically concerning the crisis of the West, how “progress” has “led us to the brink of an abyss,” and of the necessity for finding an alternative—whether that means stopping or returning by way of “repentance.” The very word “repentance” (Hebrew: *t’shuvah*) translates as a return to the right way. Repentance as return not only demonstrates that the current way of progress is the “wrong” way, but that there is a “right” way, and that if we had not deviated—due to our sin—then we would still be, as we were originally and naturally, at home in our Father’s house. Return as redemption is the restoration of the perfect beginning; progress, then, can only translate into “barbarism, stupidity, rudeness, extreme scarcity” (RCPR 227-229). For Strauss, “the perfect end is the restoration of the perfect beginning” (227).

part of the lion in violence and the fox in guile" (89). As Bacon writes, and Emerson knows, however, the moral always precedes the figure, but the figure expresses what may be less obvious otherwise. When we become adept at discovering analogies and detecting the unity in nature, Emerson says, drawing on Bacon (NO 2:XXVII; 334), then we are closer to understanding Spirit, the universal soul, Reason, the Creator, the Father—and above all the Law.

History is a continual fall for Emerson: "The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language" (W 1:35). The corruption of language and the corruption of man increase with "progress," as counterfeit values and "secondary desires" for riches, pleasure, power, and praise overtake "simplicity and truth" and pervert natural words and values (W 1:35). Wise men can—and it is their duty to do so, as Coleridge notes—"pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things." Such men—philosophers—have been and can be again prophets, lawgivers, founders of new modes and orders, for their command of picturesque and parabolic language that repairs the broken connections certifies as no other miracle could that "he who employs it is a man in alliance with truth and God." This eloquence, "inflamed with passion or exalted by thought," is clothed in images, and is thus a perpetual allegory (W 1:36). Such eloquence, as Channing taught, is always ready to reappear when the time is right to provide such a prophet with the "forms, the spells of persuasion, [and] the keys of power" (W 1:37).

Emerson hopes to repair his regime's and his times' sight by repairing the language. If we can see what the right, the good, the best, and so on, truly refer to in their "spiritual" and "natural" senses, then the excesses of the Enlightenment with its

legislative language of democratized natural right can be eliminated. Emerson wants to lead us back through the history of language, showing us that, as we move backwards, language becomes “more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry; or all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols” (W 1:34-35). For Emerson, the perfect end of his return is to teach that symbolic language “is the first language, so is it the last” (W 1:35). Progress and history, however, have lessened “man’s power to connect his thought with its proper symbol” (W 1:35).

The purpose of Emerson’s arguments about the symbolic and emblematic relations between language and nature is to understand that “The axioms of physics translate the laws of ethics,” that nature—the ways things are—is the way things ought to be. Emerson advises a return to what is oldest and best, to “the memorable words of history” and to “the proverbs of nations,” their stories that translate natural facts into parables and moral truths. These oldest uses of language—proverbs, fables, parables, and allegories—were properly “analogical” and if they were true once, they can be true again. What *differences* men, to use Emerson’s term, is their ability to apprehend these analogies. The political struggle between progress and virtue is that “this relation between mind and matter,” which is “free to be known by all men,” appears to some and not to others. The questions of religion, politics, and morals that exercised “every fine genius since the world began; from the era of the Egyptians and the Brahmins to that of Pythagoras, of Plato, of Bacon, of Leibnitz, of Swedenborg,” sits, Emerson says like “the Sphinx at the road-side, and from age to age, as each prophet comes by, he tries his fortune at reading her riddle” (W 1:39).

This line about the Sphinx, borrowed from Charles Emerson, perhaps a product of Charles' and Waldo's readings of Bacon together, might have taken on enough significance to become a part of *Nature* because of its resemblance to Bacon's amplification of the fable of the Sphinx in *De Sapientia Veterum*. Following Bacon's discussion of the prudence of following the mean in his re-narration of the fables of Icarus' flight and of navigating between Scylla and Charybdis, Bacon reads the story of the Sphinx as revealing a moral and philosophical lesson concerning science. The Sphinx's riddles, writes Bacon, concern the nature of things and the nature of man. To solve her riddles requires patience and *sapience*. That Oedipus, whose feet were wounded, could solve the riddle tells Bacon that caution and prudence are required when approaching the Sphinx—a symbol of nature and spirit, the physical and the metaphysical. However, and more importantly, one must exercise care once the riddle is solved, “for there is nothing so subtle and abstruse, but when it is once thoroughly understood and published to the world, even a dull wit can carry it” (855).

Certain truths are not meant for the eyes or ears of all. For Emerson, only “a life in harmony with Nature, the love of truth and of virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text” (W 1:40). Emerson, however, is not recommending a spiritual or ecological lifestyle choice. His “nature” is Plato's nature, not the Romantic's or the Audubon Society's. Those few who are able to wisely and patiently submit may, by (Masonic) degrees, advance in *sapience* and learn to see the world as an “open book”—and read its “open secret”—but in this Book of Life, those impatient to turn wisdom toward material benefit will find their names blotted out. “The fundamental law of criticism,” Emerson writes, borrowing from Coleridge, is that “every scripture is to be interpreted by the same

spirit which gave it forth" (W 1:40). Those not of this spirit are ripped to shreds by the talons of the Sphinx; those of the spirit, however, know the significance of the "hidden life and final cause" of every form and thus escape death (W 1:40).

In *Nature's* fifth chapter, "Discipline," Emerson repeats after Bacon, "Nature is a discipline" (W 1:42), and proper submission to its discipline educates both the Understanding and Reason. Becoming an initiate of this order, one learns how to deal with objects of the senses, the "necessary lessons of difference, of likeness, of order, of being and seeming, of progressive arrangement; of ascent from particular to general; of combination of one end to manifold forces" (W 1:42-43). Once the necessity of this difference and rank ordering in nature is understood sensually, one can see how this natural ethical order is either displayed in good regimes or perverted in bad regimes. Difference of property, character, and fortune are just as natural as the differences in nature, and it is a sign of distinction to perceive the necessity of separation, gradation, and scale. The wise understand, but "The foolish have no range in their scale, but suppose every man is as every other man" (W 1:44).¹⁵

¹⁵ In his journals, Emerson laments that he was not raised in a nobler, richer atmosphere. He looks up to those aristocrats of wealth and privilege who seem to lead and decide so easily. In the education of the Will, he writes, "the possession of property" is "a great addition of force," but "It is not the possession of luxuries, but the exercise of power which belongs to wealth that has wrought this effect" (J 3:256). A young person with "superior intellectual powers" is usually an "imbecile" because of his lack of acquaintance with these powers. Just as the young man studying the art of being a general in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* is instructed by Socrates to learn every aspect of his art, so Emerson thinks the only way to transform "bashful, timid" intellectuals "into adroit, fluent, masterful gentlemen" is for them to work "with the forces of millions of property for months and years upon the wills of hundreds of persons." Young Northern men as he was, he says, cannot compare in this regard with "the fine manners of the young Southerners brought up amidst slaves." "My manners and history would have been very different, if my parents were rich, when I was a boy at school" (J 3:257).

Insight into nature and nature's game—"Nature's dice are always loaded" (W 1:44)—is what refines the one who has submitted to the discipline. Every event, Emerson writes, teaches about "the exercise of the Will, or the lesson of power" (W 1:45). In a complicated arrangement of Baconian rhetoric, Emerson writes that this individual growing in power by his understanding of how to apply his will, "is learning the secret that he can reduce under his will, not only particular events but great classes, nay, the whole series of events, and so conform all facts to his character." The one who masters the art of commanding by obeying, of combining patience and will, becomes—or has the right to proclaim himself as—a prophet, a messiah, or the one who announces the new law.

Proceeding along the path of this insight, Emerson writes, "Sensible objects conform to the premonitions of Reason and reflect the conscience. All things are moral; and in their boundless changes have an unceasing reference to spiritual nature" (W 1:46). While on the surface this seems a cross between Hegel's idea that the real is the rational and Kant's theories of transcendental ideals, Emerson's intention here is less to give a philosophical justification of things than to demonstrate the moral lessons of nature's law and ethics. Every change in nature—chemical, vegetable, or animal—"from the sponge up to Hercules, shall hint or thunder to man the laws of right and wrong, and echo the Ten Commandments" (W 1:46). Nature's lessons are religious, and prophets and priests have "drawn deeply from this source." In nature everything is allegorical and offers up to the man of insight ways of making parables that reveal (or conceal) the true law: "This ethical character so penetrates the bone and marrow of nature, as to seem the end for which it was made" (W 1:46). If this is true of nature's ends, then it is true of *Nature's*,

and to understand that this allegorical, parabolic “public and universal function” is merely its “first use” which is never exhausted is to understand the hints of a higher law that are revealed through these exoteric, moral teachings. If “every natural process is a version of a moral sentence,” then it is perhaps wisest to read *Nature*’s sentences as moral sentences, perhaps wisest to read an Emerson sentence such as “The moral law lies at the centre of nature and radiates to the circumference” as metadiscourse that instructs the careful reader on how to read *Nature* (W 1:47).

While property and fortune can create gentlemanly manners and a sense of power, things Emerson undoubtedly admires, he cannot let these material factors alone determine an individual’s moral worth. Those counted truly wise, who influenced not only their times but later epochs, are those who had insight into how to read nature: “The moral influence of nature upon every individual is that amount of truth which it illustrates to him” (W 1:48). The deeper one’s insight into the moral structure of nature, the further one is drawn into the guild. One’s initiation perhaps begins and ends with the insight into “the unity of Nature,—the unity in variety” (W 1:48). On this issue, Emerson says, deploying the mode of *occultatio* (emphasizing something by pointedly seeming to pass over it), “The fable of Proteus has a cordial truth” (W 1:48), but he leaves it to the reader to seek out this truth.

We can perhaps discover Emerson’s idea about Proteus if we turn to Bacon’s *De Sapientia Veterum*, where we read that Proteus, herdsman to Neptune, was an old man and a prophet “of the very first order, and indeed thrice excellent; for he knew all three,—not the future only, but likewise the past and the present” (837). (Proteus was, then, of the *Trismegisti* Emerson adored—Hermes, Pythagoras, and Plato.) Possessed of the

power of divination, Proteus, “the messenger and interpreter of all antiquity and all secrets” (837), could transform into any shape, and is, for Bacon, representative of matter, which is “the most ancient of all things, next to God” (838). That Proteus counts his sheep at noon represents for Bacon the truth of sacred history about the time of creation when, “by virtue of the divine word *producat* matter came together at the command of the Creator, not by its own circuitous processes, but all at once” (838). Proteus is a symbol of “the face of matter unconstrained and at liberty”; however, a “skilful Servant of Nature” knows how to control protean transformations, and knowing how to do so makes one also, like Proteus, a Trismegistus—a prophet who understands the three times, for he who understands the nature of matter understands “all things past, present, and to come” (838).

For Emerson, the careful reader of nature understands the relations between parts and wholes, leasts and mosts, and sees resemblances even where the analogy is not obvious. He knows that “Every universal truth which we express in words, implies or supposes every other truth. *Omne verum vero consonat*” (W 1:50). This harmony or agreement with all things, this unity, writes Emerson “is like a great circle on a sphere, comprising all possible circles; which, however, may be drawn and comprise it in like manner. Every such truth is the absolute Ens seen from one side. But it has innumerable sides” (W 1:50).

The Rhetoric of Initiation

The loneliest man, after twenty years, discovers that he stood in a circle of friends, who will then show like a close fraternity held by some Masonic tie.

—Emerson, “Letters and Social Aims” (W 12:397)

No man can learn what he has not preparation for learning, however near to his eyes is the object. A chemist may tell his most precious secrets to a carpenter,

and he shall be never the wiser,—the secrets he would not utter to a chemist for an estate.

—Emerson, “Spiritual Laws” (W 2:139)

In the fifth book of *De Augmentis*, Bacon writes that “sense sends all kinds of images over to imagination for reason to judge of; and reason again when it has made its judgment and selection, sends them over to the imagination before the decree be put into execution” (499). However, “in matters of faith and religion our imagination raises itself above our reason,” for “divine grace uses the motions of the imagination as an instrument of illumination, just as it uses the motions of the will as an instrument of virtue; which is the reason why religion ever sought access to the mind by similitudes, types, parables, visions, dreams” (499). To convey the highest truths, ordinary language will not do, for, as Emerson writes, “Words are finite organs of the infinite mind. They cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth. They break, chop, and impoverish it” (W 1:50). When we are treating nature and not rhetoric, Bacon writes, “truth slips wholly out of our hands, because the subtlety of nature is so much greater than the subtlety of words.” Where syllogism fails, induction is called for because induction sees patterns and laws and knows “words are but the current tokens or marks of popular notions of things” (Bacon 503).

Bacon discusses the topics or commonplaces of rhetoric and the modes of arguing by induction or syllogism, but the art of judging of words is difficult, for when words are written, they often become encrypted like hieroglyphs or ciphers. In Bacon’s discussion of literal ciphers, used for political purposes, he writes that such ciphers ought to be easy to write yet impossible to decipher, and they should be able to pass without raising suspicion: “For if letters fall into the hands of those who have power either over the

writers or over those to whom they are addressed, although the cipher may be safe and impossible to decipher, yet the matter comes under examination and question" (527).

Though Emerson seems to have expressed little interest in literal ciphering, he might have found Bacon's idea that the highest degree of ciphering is "to write *omnia per omnia*" quite interesting, as well as Bacon's idea that the best ciphering excludes the decipherer (123). This method of ciphering by which anything can signify anything, in which anything can be written by anything, would certainly appeal to Emerson, for he is at once attempting to crack God's code in nature and reveal (while concealing) in code his own deciphering. Not content with the senses or mere fables passed on by tradition, Emerson seeks a rhetoric and a hermeneutic that can read the symbols of nature—where anything can signify anything—and transmit headings for those who seek to unravel the code which excludes those who do not possess the fundamental insight of *omnia per omnia*. Vanity immediately excludes most interpreters, but those who command by obeying are admitted.

While "intellectual science has been observed to beget invariably a doubt of the existence of matter," the true scientist for Emerson is one who humbly transforms scientific inquiry into the metaphysical inquiry into the "immortal necessary uncreated natures, that is, upon Ideas," which are "the thoughts of the Supreme Being" (W 1:60-61). The laws that science discovers in nature are no different from the Law philosophy or religion discovers there. They are accessible, however, "to few men," though "by piety or passion" potentially all can be raised "into their region" and become divine (W 1:61). To discover these ideas and laws is to be present at the creation of the world. It is

to understand the wisdom that speaks in the passage Emerson misquotes from Proverbs 8:23-30:

These are they who were set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When he prepared the heavens, they were there; when he established the clouds above, when he strengthened the fountains of the deep. Then they were by him as one brought up with him. Of them took he counsel. (W 1:61)

Should we be careful enough readers to trace Emerson's misquoted source, which he does not reveal, we find that the laws Emerson speaks of (the "they" in the passage above) are the laws of wisdom—or is wisdom itself. This wisdom and these laws are co-eternal with God, and the words of wisdom "are plain to him that understandeth, and right to them that find knowledge" (Proverbs 8:9). More than this, however, are the connections made in Proverbs between wisdom, the law, and prudence, or the modes to convey truth. Wisdom dwells with prudence, and, as Bacon writes often enough in his discussions of Solomon and in his advice to his sovereign, it is by wisdom and prudence that kings reign and princes rule (8:12, 15-16). This wisdom makes possible the perception of "words of understanding," which will lead the wise man unto wise counsels, and teaches one how "to understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise and their dark sayings" (1:2-6). The Lord reveals his secrets only to the righteous (3:32) and lights only the path of the wise (6:23). To those whom secrets are revealed is given the duty of silence and prudence: "A talebearer revealeth secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter" (11:13); "A prudent man concealeth knowledge: but the heart of fools proclaimeth foolishness" (12:23). Emerson knows the proverb, "He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life: but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction" (13:3).

While it would seem nearly impossible to argue convincingly that Emerson identified strongly with any religious law within whose bounds he chose to philosophize, since he as frequently and publicly criticized religious traditions as he proclaimed them to be the source of highest revelation, Emerson seems to possess a certain “doctrinal adhesion” and abide by the law of wisdom as stated in Proverbs: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding” (9:10). As Van Cromphout writes, it is best to read Emerson as a writer in the tradition and genre of wisdom literature (157), and Hughes notes that Emerson’s use of the wisdom of the proverbs and their method of omission “accords with his rhetoric of ineffability” (163).

In *De Augmentis*, Bacon discusses King Solomon’s proverbs or aphorisms while giving advice to King James on matters of civil knowledge (conversation, negotiation, and empire or government). The wisdom to be derived from Solomon regarding this royal art includes the art of silence, an art, Bacon notes, which ought to be as much practiced by the philosopher who advises the king as by a king himself. Drawing on examples from Zeno and Cicero, Bacon applies the advice concerning prudence and silence given in Proverbs to political matters.¹⁶ He notes the eloquence of holding one’s tongue, but since he cannot be wholly silent when discussing the art of silence, he will be “very brief, which is the next thing to silence” (579). Proverbs or aphorisms, parables, and fables were used in times past to conceal what would be too impolitic to declare openly, but Machiavelli’s indirect mode of discoursing on histories, Bacon notes, works as well (593). These methods of disclosing have the advantage over secrecy, ciphering,

¹⁶ Similar to Alfarabi’s anecdote of the disguised pious ascetic, Bacon compares the way of Solomon to a donning a garment that is “made in fashion,” but ought not be “too curious or costly.” It sets forth virtues and hides defects and ought not be “too strait, so as to confine the mind and interfere with its freedom in business and action” (581).

and concealment that use “dark arts and methods,” for they appear to be open and ingenious and contain no mischief while in the dark arts “dissimulation breeds errors which ensnare the dissembler himself” (600-01).¹⁷

Most of Bacon’s explanations of the proverbs are directed at his royal audience and treat practical matters, but one (included in *De Augmentis* but not in *Advancement*) seems to have a different significance. The proverb “A fool utters all his mind, but a wise man reserves something for the future” (Proverbs 29:11), Bacon explains by remarking that this it is not directed at the foolish man who lets out “what should be uttered, and what should be concealed” equally, nor the plain speaker who inveighs without discrimination against each and all, nor at mere talkativeness, but at “a method of discourse of all others most unwise and impolitic” (586). This foolish method is one of blurting it all out at once. In its stead, Bacon recommends “a speech that is broken and let fall part by part,” for this aphoristic method creates a better impression, but more than this “the matters touched are not distinctly and severally apprehended and weighed; and they have not time enough to settle.” Thus, only the careful reader or listener will apprehend the author’s intention, and the rest are excluded not by his dissembling but by

¹⁷ Montaigne, in “Of Liars,” excuses himself from the accusation of dissembling for he notes that to be a good liar one must have a good memory to keep track of one’s lies. Since his memory is bad, he says, he does not engage in any lies. He also argues that many of his contemporaries have attempted to gain the reputation of possessing this fine wit, but, he points out, “they do not see if they have the reputation of it, the effect can no longer be” (1:9:32). Thus, Montaigne implies that he is honest and does not engage in the “accursed vice”; however, while not appealing to the distinctions of the grammarians between an “untruth” and a “lie,” he does point out that “falsehood,” or “the reverse of *truth* has a hundred thousand forms, and a field indefinite, without bound or limit. . . . There are a thousand ways to miss the white, there is only one to hit it” (1:9:33). While holding this vice in such great horror that he could not protect himself from danger “by an impudent and solemn lie,” he does indicate with his question, “And how much less sociable is false speaking than silence,” that like Bacon, Montaigne is willing to use the modes and art of silence where a lie might be called for.

their own inability to pay attention. This method also allows the author to detect the effects of the instruction or speech on the audience, allowing the author to “take warning what to suppress and what to select in that which is to follow” (587).

Bacon’s discussion of the aphoristic method occurs between his discussion of ciphering and his chapter on rhetoric. While Emerson would certainly have few quibbles with Bacon’s definition of rhetoric (“to apply and recommend the dictates of reason to imagination, in order to excite the appetite and will” [535]),¹⁸ Bacon’s discussion of the Method of discourse, or the Wisdom of Transmission, seems more pertinent to Emerson’s project in *Nature*. Bacon divides the method of transmitting a teaching into the “Magistral” and the “Initiative” (or “Probation” in the *Advancement*): “The magistral method teaches; the initiative intimates” (530). The initiative method is not concerned with the beginnings of sciences, for it resembles “the sacred ceremonies” and the Eleusinian traditions, which “disclose and lay bare the very mysteries of the sciences.” Contrasting the two methods, he writes,

The magistral requires that what is told should be believed; the initiative that it should be examined. The one transmits knowledge to the crowd of learners; the other to the sons, as it were, of science. The end of one is the use of knowledges, as they now are; of the other the continuation and further progression of them. (530)

Emerson, fond of repeating the wisdom of George Fox that the truth can only be interpreted in the same spirit that it was given, was no doubt equally moved by Bacon’s statement: “But knowledge that is delivered to others as a thread to be spun on ought to be insinuated (if it were possible) in the same method wherein it was originally invented”

¹⁸ Compare this to his definition of the proverb which ought to be “taken and used as spurs to industry, and not as stirrups to insolence, rather to beget in men resolution and strength of judgment than arrogance or outward declaration” (594).

(530). Following Bacon's method concerning the Wisdom of Transmission, Emerson in *Nature* practices the art of silence regarding the sources of his wisdom and knowledge, yet his method allows him "to revisit his own knowledge, and trace over again the footsteps both of his cognition and consent; and by that means to transplant it into another mind just as it grew in his own" (Bacon 530).

Both the magistral and the initiative methods "agree in aiming to separate the vulgar among the auditors from the select," but the magistral is exoteric while the initiative is acroamatic, "a distinction observed by the ancients principally in the publication of books." This "acroamatic or enigmatical method was itself used among the ancients, and employed with judgment and discretion," Bacon writes, but it has been disgraced by those who have used it "to put forward their counterfeit merchandise" (531). The intention of this method "seems to be by obscurity of delivery to exclude the vulgar from the secrets of knowledges, and to admit those only who have either received the interpretation of the enigmas through the hands of the teachers, or have wits of such sharpness and discernment as can pierce the veil" (531). The exoteric method delivers knowledge *methodically*, but the acroamatic or initiative uses aphorisms, which try the writer and represent "only portions and as it were fragments of knowledge," and these "invite others to contribute and add something in their turn" (531). That is, such a method is merely a naming of topics.

The last section of the chapter "Idealism" in *Nature* treats religion and ethics, which Emerson defines as "the practice of ideas, or the introduction of ideas into life" (W 1:62). Both demonstrate the dependence of nature upon spirit, but while ethics teaches duties that derive from man, religion teaches duties that derive from God. Religion

teaches that the visible world is temporal and the unseen world is eternal. This lesson is not reserved for the few and even the “unschooled” of “the most ignorant sects” understand the vanities of this world. Emerson has “no hostility to nature”; he only wishes “to indicate the true position of nature in regard to man” (W 1:63). What philosophical idealism offers that the “popular faith” does not is a world for contemplation according to reason, not understanding or the senses, and a perception of the world in God. It looks to ends, not means, sees Christianity as more than ecclesiastical history or theological disputes; it is not concerned so much with miracles or the demythologizing of them by historical criticism, but accepts the world “as it finds it, as the pure and awful form of religion in the world” (W 1:64).

Emerson concurs with Coleridge on this point at the beginning of the chapter “Spirit,” when he writes, “It is essential to a true theory of nature and of man, that it should contain somewhat progressive” (W 1:65). This ambiguity (*amphibologia*, see Quintilian 3.4.46, 7.9.1) allows Emerson to speak in the democratic and enlightened language of his times, but his referent escapes his times. This is not a progression of modern science or politics, not a matter of data, uses, or numbers. He is not interested in “uses that are exhausted or . . . facts that end in the statement”—these “cannot be all that is true of this brave lodging wherein man is harbored, and wherein all his faculties find appropriate and endless exercise” (W 1:65). Like Bacon and Coleridge, Emerson is most interested in the progressive exploration—by means of reason, not understanding—of those mysteries that exist between man and nature and God or Spirit. This kind of faithful philosophical exploration and self-reflection perceives that nature “suggests the absolute,” “a perpetual effect,” and the “happiest man” is not the one who lords over

matter but who comprehends spirit and “who learns from nature the lesson of worship” (W 1:65).

Such a one commands by obeying, is active though patient, and speaks while remaining silent: “Of that ineffable essence which we call Spirit, he that thinks most, will say least” (W 1:65). Emerson has learned well the lessons of submission and prudence, and he has learned even to disguise his learning in more easily understood commonplaces of poetry or mysticism: “when we try to define and describe” God in the coarse phenomena of matter, “both language and thought desert us, and we are as helpless as fools and savages” (W 1:66). These intellectual or spiritual perceptions can only be conveyed by means of hints and indication—the ways of Nature and of God. Science, logical discourse, and political thinking can only treat of protean matter, but “that essence [spirit] refuses to be recorded in propositions.” When man worships God intellectually, nature stands “as the apparition of God” and is “the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual” (W 1:66).

Idealism (and thus, then, Transcendentalism), as a philosophy divorced from faith in the revealed law, is useful only as “an introductory hypothesis,” Emerson argues, for it serves as a station out of materialistic thinking by considering matter as phenomena, but “it does not satisfy the demands of the spirit.” It does not consider God or answer, “Whence is matter? and Whereto?” Emerson considers this philosophical faithlessness solipsistic: “It leaves me in the splendid labyrinth of my perceptions, to wander without end” (W 1:67). Idealizing does not comprehend what is “behind nature” or how spirit works “through us,” making us like “the creator in the finite” (W 1:67-68). This realization cannot occur through the progressive compilation of facts and data nor

through a contemplation of the whole that excludes a higher source of spirit but only in the most ancient of ways: “the sources of wisdom and power lie, and point to virtue” as “the golden key / Which opens the palace of eternity” (Milton, unattributed; W 1:68). The progression of that other way is, for Emerson, a process of degeneration that makes us “strangers in nature as we are aliens from God” (W 1:69). Emerson’s intention, in this work of hints and indications, and throughout his corpus, is to reverse this process and restore the proper meanings and histories to words, like Coleridge, but more than that by doing so he desires to create the possibility of a regime—if not a world—where Nature’s law qua God’s law reigns and each man minds his own business.

For Emerson, this kind of rationalism—learned from his study of the eclectic tradition of Platonists, which includes Plutarch, Montaigne, Bacon, and Coleridge—combines science, wisdom, faith, and submission. Contrary to many in the Emerson Industry, Christopher Newfield, in *The Emerson Effect*, argues that Emerson was not a prophet of radical individualism but an advocate of submission to preexisting laws (44-45). Newfield discusses how an Emersonian ideology infects American liberal democracy creating citizens who seem to will their own slavery, so that an Emersonian politics is based in getting individuals to express their “individuality through submission to preestablished law” (62). Newfield, however, does not see in Emerson’s advocacy of submission the submission of a political philosopher before religious law and revelation, nor does he see that the submission of the many before the powers that be is merely an exoteric fringe benefit of this teaching. In this, though, Newfield is no different from many other critics who seem at once to consider Emerson a mystic yet to base his ethics in the more or less secular notion of moral sentiment. Packer, for instance, argues that

the moral sentiment—that special faculty of the soul capable of intuiting moral truths—provides Emerson with the Archimedean point for his thought (34-36). Though Packer asserts that the moral sentiment for Emerson was the voice of God meant to be obeyed, Van Cromphout writes that Emerson’s “metaethical efforts were directed primarily toward establishing the autonomy of ethics vis-à-vis religion and toward defining the relations between ethics and nature and between ethics and knowledge” (30). Emerson’s reliance on the moral sentiment, he notes, dispenses with any external or empirically derived authority while it maintains that morality is the essence of human nature (34-35). Critics often engage in this torturous style of thought because they fail to take seriously Emerson’s doctrinal adhesion to religious law as a political philosopher. They fail to understand that a political philosopher can at once seriously doubt revelation yet remain faithful to it, never exoterically casting it into doubt for others.

Modern rationalism and modern criticism cannot comprehend what political philosophers know and practice. The purloined mysteries of the natural world and of faith cannot be solved by their methods, and attempts to do so only end in the banishment of the mysterious, leaving us lost, with our microscopes and statistical tables, in a dark and sensual wood. If modern history is a process of degeneration for Emerson, it is because he believes that what is oldest is the best, and what is oldest are the laws and fables of the prophets, the revealed law and the laws of the ancients. Disoriented in the mode of thought produced by the Enlightenment, people mistake material or economic “progress” for true or spiritual progress. Science and politics continually make more things available to more people, so most think this victory proves the goodness of science and politics, but for Emerson, this “progress” is merely a continual lowering of standards

and values, a falling off from greatness and virtue, and he would never assume that mere victory proves merit. To understand best how to live in the world and how to order it, one has to submit to it, and submitting to it is submitting to the best truths presented in the best old books, the oldest of books.

The Enlightenment—its scientists, writers, philosophers, and political theorists—could not disprove the articles of faith that undergird the old world, but they could laugh at them and mock them. They could not disprove the existence of God, God's laws, or miracles, but with their epistemological methods they could persuade many that these things were unknowable, or were superstitions or delusions, or were used by those in power to manipulate those without power. They could displace the old faith with a new faith in humanity's power over matter and eliminate that fear of God, which was in the proverbial past the beginning of wisdom. Unlike Francis Bacon, the "sons of science" could argue that their methods were better because their methods were difficult and required testing and were often uncertain while faith was easy, comforting, and therefore false. By this process, moderns became incapable of reading a political philosopher.

Things Hidden in Nature

There are higher secrets of culture, which are not for the apprentices but for proficients. These are lessons only for the brave. We must know our friends under ugly masks.

—Emerson, "Culture" (W 6:154-55)

Nature works very hard, and only hits the white once in a million throws. In mankind she is contented if she yields one master in a century.

—Emerson, "Considerations by the Way" (W 6:238)

For Emerson, modern philosophy seeks to escape the most difficult questions concerning the things most needful. Instead of steering away from the mysteries of faith and the revealed law because they are "unprovable," Emerson advocates turning towards

them. Instead of these mysteries rebuffing thought, for him they demand thought—they are a commandment to philosophize. However, in order to begin to philosophize, one must first recognize their authority, make oneself subject to them, take them as the boundaries (*ap-horizein*) for thought. Not all men are suited to such philosophizing, and for them religion provides salutary teachings with literal interpretations concerning the moral conduct of life, but for Emerson those suited to philosophize are not only authorized by the revealed law of God and Nature to do so but are obligated to do so, and the “matter” of their philosophizing is revelation. This exoteric aspect of the revealed religious law cannot teach the philosopher anything he does not already know—the ancient philosophers came to similar conclusions without the aid of revelation. The philosopher can read between the lines of the revealed law and comprehend what is disguised by its exoteric teachings. But the prudent philosopher whose wisdom begins in the fear of God also philosophizes with a healthy fear of the multitude—whether the religion of that multitude is spiritual, scientific, or political.

Emerson belongs to a long line of philosophers who take their cue from Socrates and declare their ignorance concerning the great questions. If one realizes—by a true faith or a healthy skepticism—that finite humans are incapable of knowing the truth, one can transform this condition of ignorance into the condition of philosophizing and understand one’s social duty as a philosopher. Instead of dismissing what cannot be comprehended and demonstrated, one observes this limit, and what is not accessible through reason becomes available through revelation. The philosopher whose rationalism includes a belief in revelation sees no contradiction between philosophy and religion, for both teach that humans are by nature political beings in need of society,

laws, and a lawgiver. Human law attends to the health of the body and makes peace possible in societies, but without divine law, as Emerson writes in the final section of *Nature*, “Prospects,” man is but a “half-man” who “works on the world with his understanding alone” (W 1:75).

“In inquiries respecting the laws of the world and the frame of things,” he writes, “the highest reason is always the truest. That which seems faintly possible, it is so refined, is often faint and dim because it is deepest seated in the mind among eternal verities” (W 1:70). It is those rational truths that transcend mere understanding that are most needed for life, according to Emerson, but these are not always self-evident. They demand as much effort and method as modern science does. Thus the rationalist with a belief in revelation takes revelation and prophecy as his topic, and if his submission to it is perfect enough, Emerson believes, the philosopher can become a vessel for the progressive revelation of prophecy, can hear the voice of *dæmons*, and can make evident the laws by which the world ought to be ordered. Such a philosopher takes as his duty the obligation to become this passive medium as well as an interpreter—of Nature and of God’s revelation. He understands, as Coleridge argues, the function of the ancient prophets who gave the right guidance for the perfection of the intellect; he understands that ancient philosophy could only lead so far towards perfection and that “Revelation has provided you new subjects for reflection, and new treasures of knowledge, never to be unlocked by him who remains self-ignorant” (Coleridge, *Aids* xvii). He also understands that prophets employed prudent methods of speech—aphorisms, fables, and parables—whose esoteric content becomes available only after strenuous and lengthy preparations and subjugation to them. The speech of the prophets founded states and

gave the law. They fulfill the conditions Plato established for the creation of the best regime. It is, therefore, the duty of the faithful philosopher not to innovate but to renovate, to return, to interpret the world and its laws in such a way as to bring the world back into accord with revelation.

“Empirical science is apt to cloud the sight,” Emerson writes, “and by the very knowledge of functions and processes to bereave the student of the manly contemplation of the whole” (W 1:70). However,

the best read naturalist who lends an entire and devout attention to truth, will see there remains much to learn of his relation to the world, and that it is not to be learned by any addition or subtraction or other comparison of known quantities, but is arrived at by untaught sallies of the spirit, by a continual self-recovery, and by entire humility. (W 1:70)

Guesses and dreams can be better guides “into the secrets of nature” than “concerted experiments,” for “the problems to be solved are precisely those which the physiologist and the naturalist omit to state”—the problems of whence and whereto (W 1:70-71).

They cannot read the hints that “explain the relation between things and thoughts”; they are incapable of that “occult recognition”(W 1:71).

The necessary truths, Emerson argues by hint and indication, are neither to be discovered by scientific or even political experiments nor will they arrive from the future. They exist “now,” perpetually speaking to those who are capable of hearing them. The revealed law of the prophets as well as the moral law of philosophers of the past are always already the ideal law and contain the Platonist requirement of the coincidence of philosophy and political rule. This ideal law does not need to be sought but only understood and recovered—deepened, not questioned. The prudent philosopher does not break the law by suggesting innovations or interpreting revelation in ways that might

cause the multitudes to persecute him. The prudent philosopher's rationalism is perfect, for he understands that a world ordered by merely man's law or by ideologies and methods of the Enlightenment is neither desirable nor wholly possible. Such a philosopher is bound by the law but not by its literal interpretation, and his prudence consists in explaining the esoteric content of prophecy and the revealed law to those with ears to hear not by a clear, coherent, and systematic method but by using those initiative methods of parables, fables, allegories, and aphorisms. Instead of blurting it all out, these truths are interspersed, hidden from all but those whose dedication leads them to them.

The hint that a higher order of truth transcends the physical, Emerson writes, draws men to study science, but science quickly loses sight of the ends of this higher truth. The parts are examined, but the whole is forgotten. Science is not poetic. Emerson attributes to Plato a passage from Aristotle's poetics (1451a36-40): "poetry comes nearer to vital truth than history" (W 1:73). In a sentence echoed later by Wallace Stevens in "The Poems of Our Climate" ("The imperfect is our paradise. / Note that, in this bitterness, delight, / Since the imperfect is so hot in us, / Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds" [194]), Emerson notes he prefers "imperfect theories, and sentences which contain glimpses of truth, to digested systems which have no one valuable suggestion" (W 1:73). "A wise writer," Emerson notes, "will feel that the ends of study and composition are best answered by announcing undiscovered regions of thought, and so communicating, through hope, new activity to the torpid spirit" (W 1:73).

Emerson concludes *Nature* with some sayings from his "Orphic poet" (himself, Alcott, Böhme?) and his reflections on them. These sayings, which are "both history and prophecy," concern the degradation of the spiritual man who seeks his element in

temporal matter instead of eternal spirit. Such a man is a dethroned king, like Nebuchadnezzar eating grass; he is "a god in ruins," a dwarf (W 1:74). This degraded man is a half-man, an "imbruted . . . selfish savage" whose dealing with the economic and mechanical uses of nature Emerson compares to a banished king buying back his kingdom "inch by inch, instead of vaulting at once to his throne" (W 1:75-76). The proper understanding of history can become prophecy if the study of history is a process of reflection and remembering, a recovery and regeneration, a reinstitution of what once was true. Spirit has intervened in human affairs and human history to illuminate the "thick darkness." Emerson asks us to recall

the traditions of miracles in the earliest antiquity of all nations, the history of Jesus Christ; the achievements of a principle as in religious and political revolutions and in the abolition of the slave-trade; the miracles of enthusiasm, as those reported of Swedenborg, Hohenlohe, and the Shakers; many obscure and yet contested facts, now arranged under the name of Animal Magnetism; prayer; eloquence; self-healing; and the wisdom of children. (W 1:76)

Though Emerson is no advocate of this entire list of things, he does admire them as "examples of Reason's momentary grasp of the sceptre," or as examples of "an instantaneous in-streaming causing power," as moments where power looked not for momentary gain but demonstrated that power that exists outside time and space.

"Deep calls unto deep," Emerson writes. *Nature* is Emerson's initiatory political call for "the redemption of the soul." If the world is opaque instead of transparent, if it "lacks unity, and lies broken in heaps," it is because "man is disunited with himself" (W 1:77). This god in ruins has forgotten how to reflect, how to pray, how to read what is before him. If he learns anew to read the fables that conform facts "to the higher law of the mind," then he will see "the miraculous in the common" and will perceive "the real higher law" without the means of fables: "To the wise, therefore, a fact is true poetry, and

the most beautiful of fables" (W 1:78). When instead of approaching nature as matter he begins to approach it as spirit and pure idea, he will see with "new eyes." To conform—submit, obey—to this pure idea, to make oneself its medium, transforms one into an Adam, a Cæsar, and one can build one's own world, no matter how humble it may be. The progress Emerson seeks is not scientific but is that of the "advancing spirit." When "the influx of spirit" is incorporated into human affairs, there will be "a correspondent revolution" greater than those of modern history. Those enlightened revolutions could only hope to manage "the sordor and filths of nature," but this light, this sun of reason and virtue will dry them and the winds will exhale them (W 1:79). Then this blind man will be "gradually restored to perfect sight" (W 1:80).

Nature is a book of hints, merely a naming of topics, and Emerson's method in it is esoteric. Maimonides, in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, follows the dictates of the Law and addresses his commentary on the Book to a single student whom he considers "fit to receive . . . an exposition of the esoteric ideas contained in the prophetic books" (1). Emerson's object and method resemble Maimonides'. Emerson and many of his contemporaries (and perhaps everyone in the nineteenth century) had their lives and faith shaken by the progress of science and industry and by the religious controversies and new forms of hermeneutics of their day. They resemble Maimonides and his student who were both trained to believe in the holy Law and to fulfill their moral and religious duties, but their study of philosophy made it difficult for them to accept "the literal interpretation of the Law" (2). Emerson's initiative rhetoric, in *Nature* and throughout his corpus, is his way, as Bacon says, of retracing his path of cognition and consent in order to transplant knowledge in another mind as it grew in his own. Guided solely by reason, Maimonides

argues, one is bound to doubt the Law, and the temptation to reject it can lead to anxiety and perplexity. It is the duty of those who have experienced this, yet remained faithful, to guide others.

Emerson sought a way to maintain his faith amidst philosophical doubt and historical degeneration—of language, of politics, of religion. He sought a return to the original relation to the universe—the one espoused by those prophets, poets, Trismegisti, and philosophers whose books make him feel present at the sowing of the seed of the world. Emerson was wise enough—by nature and by study—to know he could not simply blurt out all that he could say. Revelation is a gradual process that requires a complicated method. Though not bound by the same kind of religious law as Maimonides, whereby it is forbidden to fully expose the esoteric truths publicly, “even in the presence of a single student, unless he be wise and able to reason for himself, and even then you should merely acquaint him with the heads of the different sections of the subject” (2-3), Emerson knows enough from his own study of the hermeticists and occultists of the Platonic and Neo-Platonic traditions, from Montaigne, Bacon, and Coleridge, that revelation must dawn upon the reader through the reader’s own dedicated study and sincere submission and cannot be simply given. The student, as Emerson admonishes, must “Build therefore your own world.” Emerson does not turn to the Book for his commentary but to the book of nature believing that it is the constant revelation of spirit—of God—and that it still contains the seeds of law and faith that prophets have always found, despite the “progress” of history.

If, as Eric Wilson argues, Emerson’s essay tries *to be* nature, it must be open to all yet still conceal things from careless observers. Its secrets are hiding in the light.

Emerson's essays are, in a sense, like those cabinets at the Museum of Natural History, as Brown contends, but they are more mysterious than that. His essay is merely a naming of topics, and provides only the headings, as Maimonides recommends. "But even these," Maimonides writes, "have not been systematically arranged" but are "scattered and interspersed with other topics." Maimonides considers his seemingly random and contradictory book to be systematic, but only the careful reader can discern that system.

There is no reason to believe that Emerson was any less systematic in his naming of topics. "My object," Maimonides explains, "in adopting this arrangement is that truths should be at one time apparent, and at another time concealed." By this method he does not deviate from the Divine Will "which has withheld from the multitude the truths required for the knowledge of God" (3). Neither does Emerson's arrangement deviate from Nature's law, which at once reveals and conceals (the art of *aletheia* [see Detienne]). Nature speaks as the prophets spoke: in figures, metaphors, allegories, symbols, fables, and parables. A discourse on this book of nature must speak the same way. Maimonides says that revelation appears like flashes of lightning. For some those flashes are so frequent as to turn night into day. These are prophets. For others the flashes are infrequent, or they receive only reflected light (as the philosophers do). The multitude, however, lives in continual darkness, and Maimonides does not write for them (3). As Emerson writes, a "higher" or "spiritual element is essential for perfection" (W 1:25).

Both Maimonides and Emerson understood that through careful study the student arrives at the same knowledge of the book as the master. Those with ears to hear will discover the true teaching, but "the uneducated may comprehend it according to the

measure of their faculties and the feebleness of their apprehension" (Maimonides 4). Maimonides asserts that "the exoteric lessons of the prophecies [are] intelligible to everybody," and Emerson asserts that though nature is intelligible to all in terms of use, nature contains secrets hidden from all but the few. Nature's truths are "free to be known by all men," but "It appears to man, or it does not appear" (W 1:39).

Throughout *Nature* Emerson drops hints concerning how a wise man ought to seek the truth. The wise man does not extort Nature's secret and lose his curiosity (W 1:14). In nature, "we return to faith and reason" (W 1:15). The "attentive eye" seeks to record the flux of nature's beauty (W 1:24). For the wise man, the beauty of the world is an object of the intellect, not the senses, for the intellect "searches out the absolute order of things as they stand in the mind of God" (W 1:28). He knows the "origin of words" and knows natural facts have spiritual import (W 1:32). The wise man hierarchizes while the foolish have no scale (W 1:44). He sees "unity in variety" (W 1:48).

Like Maimonides, Emerson instructs his reader that there are things hidden in his text as there are things hidden in nature: "We know more from nature than we can at will communicate" (W 1:37). Many "ideal affinities" are "unspeakable but intelligible" (W 1:52, 59). The attempt to describe God or Spirit leaves us "helpless as fools and savages," for "that essence refuses to be recorded in propositions" (W 1:66), but if the approach is correct, we may gain "access to the entire mind of the Creator" (W 1:68) and be able to read his book with the same mind by which it was written. Emerson writes of Nature, "in her heaps and rubbish are concealed sure and useful results"(W 1:44), but few know how or where to look. Nor have all of *Nature's* readers been able to discover what Emerson conceals in its scattered heaps.

Maimonides quotes from Proverbs: "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold, in vessels of silver" (25:11). These "vessels," he explains, denote "a filigree network" with small apertures. This demonstrates that every word "has a double sense, a literal and a figurative one." The "plain meaning" may be as valuable as silver, but "the hidden meaning" is more precious. When seen at distance, or seen superficially, the apple seems silver, but a keen-sighted person sees the gold within (6). This structure of parables is inevitable, and while their exoteric aspect may be useful and valuable (or in the case of studies of Emerson, may produce many and varied interpretations), there is something more interesting beneath. It seems foolish to approach Emerson from the outside or from the distance of contemporary criticism. Emerson sought to both pierce this filigree and reveal to others his method of doing so. To read Emerson from the outside and to ignore what and how he read is to miss the gold beneath. It is to misunderstand both Emerson's rhetorical method and intention and to remain incapable of comprehending his political philosophy.

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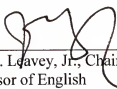
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH


Richard E. Joines was born on February 15, 1967, in Maryville, TN. He moved to Nashville, TN, in 1973, and graduated from John Overton High School in 1985. He attended Belmont College, in Nashville, Kansai Gaidai, in Japan, and graduated in 1990 with a B.A. in religious studies and philosophy and a minor in English from Western Kentucky University, in Bowling Green, KY. After two years of postbaccalaureate studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, he entered the M.F.A. program in creative writing and poetry at Wichita State University, in Wichita, KS, and received the degree in 1995. In 1995, he began coursework towards a Ph.D. in English at the University of Florida, and in 2001 was granted the degree.

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.




John P. Leavey, Jr., Chairman
Professor of English

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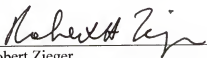
Stephanie A. Smith
Associate Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.




Phillip E. Wegner
Associate Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



Robert Zieger
Distinguished Professor of History

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



Geoffrey Waite
Associate Professor of German
Studies
Cornell University

This dissertation was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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